

History, Folklore, and Myth in the Book of Judges

The book of Judges professes to be a history of early Israel. This article unpacks how is Judges *doing* history-writing, which will implicate how historiography was done in the Ancient Near East more broadly as well as *who* is doing the history-writing in the book of Judges. To illustrate, we will look at a section of Judges where the historiographical efforts of Judges are at work.

Herodotus and Thucydides did not invent history writing, but they invented what Peter Machinist calls the “Analytical I,” a historian who “distance[s] themselves from certain things and persons around them, about which they are going to speak.”¹ Before them, such detachment is absent. Egyptian historians, for example, use the past to speak about the present.² “The past is mobilized in...a wide range of contexts and directions.”³ Thus, in the 18th-Dynasty “Neferhotep Stele,” history legitimizes a contemporary situation. They attribute causality in history to the gods, as in the 9th century “Annals of Osorkon.”⁴ Foreigners

* Robert D. Miller II, O.F.S., is Ordinary Professor of Old Testament at the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC. He is also a Research Associate in the Department of Old Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria.

¹ Peter B. Machinist, “The Voice of the Historian in the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean World,” *Interpretation* (2003): 119. The Ancient Near East had other sorts of historians - “No-historians,” “Pseudo-I’s,” and “Autobiographical I’s” - and those we should expect in the Old Testament.

² As John Baines points out, citing the MK “Instructions of Kagemni,” “Prophecy of Neferti,” and the Second Intermediate Period “Papyrus Westcar,” John Wilson and Erik Hornung were wrong to claim Egypt only thought in the present; John Baines, “Ancient Egyptian Concepts and Uses of the Past,” in *Archaeological Objectivity in Interpretation*, vol. 3.A (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 4–5.

³ Baines, 11, citing Harpers’ Songs, P. Harris 1.91-93.

⁴ A.22-23.

only appear when their impact on events was decisive. Cycles of dissolution and restoration are *post factum* but not remote.⁵ From the New Kingdom on, historians divided the past into distinct periods.⁶ Overall, historiography is stylized but not divorced from reality.

In Mesopotamia, from the Sumerian King List and Old Babylonian “Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin” to the late Berossus, history writing was a vehicle for authority, both royal and divine.⁷ New narrative styles are pioneered in the 9th-century Assyrian “Annals of Shalmaneser III,” still with no narrative plot, but approaching what we think of as narrative historiography. Arrangement is not always chronological order, but sometimes geographical, or to supply literary symmetry. Little source material is used, and the intent is still propagandistic.

By both Egyptian and Mesopotamian comparative standards, what we have in the Old Testament Former Prophets is historiography.⁸ How, then, does Israel write history? Judges’s “propagandistic” intent is in its master story: via a slow spiral into idolatry, immorality, and violence, Israel - far from conquering Canaan - becomes Canaan.⁹ What no one seems to ask is *what* material, exactly,

⁵ Baines, “Ancient Egyptian Concepts and Uses of the Past,” 10.

⁶ E.g., “Turin King List.”

⁷ Machinist, “The Voice of the Historian in the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean World,” 127; Jack M. Sasson, ed., *Judges 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, v. 6D (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2014), 8–9.

⁸ Philippe Abadie, *L’histoire d’Israël entre mémoire et relecture*, Lectio divina 229 (Paris: Cerf, 2009), 59, 42–43 but I am wary of drawing more precise connections. Some cite the 12th-century Babylonian “Weidner Chronicle” as a parallel to the so-called Deuteronomistic History, since it presents cycles of good and bad kings to help contemporary rulers avoid the fate of Naram-Sin, whose sins are anachronistic, since Babylon was not built in his lifetime. So, supposedly, 1 Kings 13-14 and 2 Kings 17 are parallel, propagandistic for Josiah as the “Weidner” was for Nebuchadnezzar. But the “Weidner Chronicle’s” line of causality reaches back beyond history to the divine realm, while the Deuteronomistic History’s reaches back to a moment in history; and unlike Yahweh’s Law, Marduk’s divine will that is flouted was that he wanted more fish. The Mesha Stela is a much closer parallel to the Bible, not only because of its Deuteronomistic language and theology but also in its geographical, non-chronological arrangement.; Bill T. Arnold, “The Weidner Chronicle and the Idea of History in Israel and Mesopotamia,” in *Faith, Tradition, and History*, ed. Alan R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 139, 145.

⁹ Millar Burrows, “Ancient Israel,” in *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 112; Yairah. Amit, *History and Ideology: Introduction to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 36 nn.4, 39–40; Niels Peter Lemche, *The Old Testament between Theology and History: A Critical Survey* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 199; Eliyahu Assis, *Self-Interest or Communal*

is “shap[ed to]...serve the historian’s purpose.”¹⁰ Moreover, while “ancient historians of Israel assumed and communicated a set of general...principles governing history,” such as those of the so-called Deuteronomistic History, both in reporting events and in conveying their meaning,¹¹ those principles are not simplistic. It is *not* just bad kings who suffer and good ones who prosper: that pattern fails not only for Hezekiah and Josiah, but also for bad kings like Manasseh.

As Millar Burrows wrote a half-century ago, “We have in the Old Testament many ideas of history.”¹² Judges has its own - more than one. We must address the “so-called”ness of the Deuteronomistic History. We must ask if Judges is part of a Deuteronomistic History. Long ago, Kuenen, Kittel, and Moore all thought J and E extended into Judges.¹³ Karl Budde thought a major break fell between Judges 8 and 9, and Judges 9-1 Kings 2 was the Yahwist. He listed things only found in those chapters and J: washing feet, *yoshev beeretz*, dimming weak eyes, deep sleep, opening mouth, flesh & bone, lying with, spies, etc.¹⁴ Argument over whether the Deuteronomistic History is Exilic, 7th-century, or as many now argue Persian-Period,¹⁵ leaves such observations unaddressed, as well as the absence of the phrase “Torah of Moses” in 1-2 Samuel and the few references to the *Book of the Law* throughout, even in Josiah’s reform.¹⁶ Finally, Deuteronomy gives

Interest: An Ideology of Leadership in the Gideon, Abimelech, and Jephthah Narratives (Judg. 6-12), Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 106 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 242–243.

¹⁰ Amit, *History and Ideology*, 38.

¹¹ Ehud Ben Zvi, “Clio Today and Ancient Israelite History,” in *Not Even God Can Alter the Past: Reflections on 16 Years of the European Seminar in Historical Methodology*, European Seminar in Historical Methodology 10 (London: T & T Clark, 2015), 27; Burrows, “Ancient Israel,” 111–13.

¹² Burrows, “Ancient Israel,” 102; also Kurt Galling, “Biblische Sinndeutung Der Geschichte,” *Evangelische Theologie* (1948): 307–319.

¹³ Otto Eissfeldt, *Geschichtsschreibung Im Alten Testament* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1948), 41; Robert H O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTSup 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 348.

¹⁴ *Die Bücher Richter und Samuel, ihre Quellen und ihr Aufbau*, 1900; Cf. Eissfeldt, *Geschichtsschreibung Im Alten Testament*, 43. Even Weinfeld and Soggin thought Judges 1:1-2:5 was JE, and rest Deuteronomistic.

¹⁵ Raymond F. Person, Jr., *The Deuteronomistic History and the Book of Chronicles* (Ancient Israel and its Literature 6; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 11; Person, *Deuteronomistic School*, 56-63, 73-81; Walter Dietrich, “Vielfalt und Einheit im Deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk,” in *Houses Full of All Good Things*, ed. Juha Pakkala and Martti Nissinen (Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society, 2008), 182-183.

¹⁶ R. E. Clements, “The Former Prophets and Deuteronomy,” in *God’s Word for Our World*, ed. J. Harold Ellens, Deborah L. Ellens, Rolf P. Knierim, and Isaac Kalimi, *Journal for the Study*

great attention to sacrifices, festivals, and priesthood, while the Deuteronomistic History does not.¹⁷ Multiple scholars now question the entire existence of a Deuteronomistic History.¹⁸

Consider Judges: nowhere else do we have such a positive view of monarchy: “In those days, there was no king in Israel: everyone did what seemed right in their own eyes.”¹⁹ Deuteronomistic theology (“Do good, get good; do bad, get bad”) appears first in Judges in 1:5-7 in the mouth of a Canaanite, where it is parodied: “As I have done, so God has repaid me,” says Adonibezek.²⁰ In Judges 11, both Jephthah and his daughter believe a caricature of the faith of Deuteronomy 23 (23:21-24).²¹ The story implies Samson and his parents do not know Israelite faith, but Samson’s theology is Deuteronomistic (e.g., 15:18-19), as is idolatrous Micah’s (17:13), as is the brutal Danites. Judges 2:1 is flatly anti-Deuteronomistic: “I will never break my covenant with you.”²² Judges *does* have a theology, but it is not Deuteronomistic: the Samson story, to which we shall return, shows Israel does not want liberation or salvation, yet according to the author, much as she would like to end it the covenant is unbreakable.²³

We can therefore suspend discussion of the Deuteronomistic Historian. If one exists, he did not write Judges, or at least not most of it.²⁴ Judges is not of

of the Old Testament Supplement 388 (London: T & T Clark, 2004): 1.90-94; K. L. Noll, “Deuteronomistic History or Deuteronomistic Debate?,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32 (2007): 333-334.

¹⁷ Graeme Auld, *Samuel at the Threshold*. Society for Old Testament Study Monographs (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2003), 189-200.

¹⁸ E.g., Gary Knoppers, Graeme Auld; Marc Z. Brettler, “Method in the Application of Biblical Source Material to Historical Writing,” in *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel*, ed. H. G. M. Williamson, Proceedings of the British Academy 143 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 313.

¹⁹ Martin Noth, “The Background of Judges 17-18,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage*, ed. Bernhard Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper, 1962).

²⁰ Alexander Rofé, “Ephraimite versus Deuteronomistic History,” in *Storia e Tradizioni di Israele*, ed. D. Garrone and F. Israel (Brescia: Paideia, 1991); Robert D. Miller II, “Deuteronomistic Theology in the Book of Judges?” *Old Testament Essays* 15 (2002): 411-416.

²¹ David Janzen, “Why the Deuteronomist Told about the Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (2005): 340-341.

²² Lemche, *The Old Testament between Theology and History*, 197.

²³ Burrows, “Ancient Israel,” 112; Miller II, “Deuteronomistic Theology in the Book of Judges?”

²⁴ Amit, *History and Ideology: Introduction to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible*, 34 n.1; The issue is not one of genre, as per Anthony J. Frendo, *Pre-Exilic Israel, the Hebrew Bible, and Archaeology: Integrating Text and Artefact*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 549 (New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 16, as if “the legends in Judges belong to a different genre from

a piece but has grown by successive expansions to its final, complex form²⁵ - although it *has* a deliberate and coherent final redaction.²⁶

Judges reveals history that is not only that of the time of its writing,²⁷ I past publications, I attempted a history of the Early Israelite Settlement, treating the biblical accounts as unproven hypotheses,²⁸ and like Gottwald, Dever, and others, confronting the information in Judges with archaeology of the Early Iron Age, equally interpreted subjectively, and finding “anchor points... broadly congruent.”²⁹ Those correspondences were adjudicated as “probable” or “possible.”³⁰ The rationale for using the book of Judges at all was not to prove agreement between Bible and archaeology,³¹ but to enrich the social history of Israel written from the archaeology alone with intellectual and cultural history. Judges’s authors could have gained accurate knowledge by their historiographical work (or lucky guesses), without us having to make blanket statements about truth or falsehood of entire narratives.³²

that of the stories in Kings which do betray a sense of history,” hardly true of the Elisha stories. See clearer discussion in Abadie, *L’histoire d’Israël entre mémoire et relecture*, 62–63; and Hans M. Barstad, *History and the Hebrew Bible: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*, *Forschungen Zum Alten Testament* 61 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 18; as Brettler, “Method in the Application of Biblical Source Material to Historical Writing,” 309 writes, “there is no form-critical genre of the historical text in the sense that a particular text is somehow marked as...I am telling the real truth.”

²⁵ Walter Beyerlin, “Gattung Und Herkunft Des Rahmens Im Richterbuch,” in *Tradition Und Situation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 9; O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 346–347; Andrew D. H. Mayes, “Deuteronomistic Royal Ideology in Judges 17-21,” *Biblical Interpretation* 9 (2001): 253.

²⁶ Lawson G. Stone, “From Tribal Confederation to Monarchic State” (Diss., Yale University, 1988), 113–129; also O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 365–366.

²⁷ The best recent exploration of which is Sasson, *Judges 1-12*, 10.

²⁸ Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 13.

²⁹ Norman K. Gottwald, *The Politics of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 163, 169; William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 101; William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 167–190.

³⁰ Ernst Axel Knauf, “History in Joshua,” in *Israel in Transition. From Late Bronze II to Iron IIa (c. 1250-850 B.C.E.). The Texts*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe, European Seminar in Historical Methodology 7–8 (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 2:130.

³¹ As Emanuel Pfoh, “On Finding Myth and History in the Bible,” in *Finding Myth and History in the Bible: Scholarship, Scholars and Errors: Essays in Honor Og Giovanni Grabini*, ed. Łukasz Niesiołowski-Spanò, Chiara Peri, and Jim West (Sheffield: Equinox, 2016), 199 accuses.

³² Knauf, “History in Joshua,” 138; Barstad, *History and the Hebrew Bible*, 21; O’Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 368; Pfoh, “On Finding Myth and History in the Bible,” 197,

This essay is not a history of the Early Israelite Settlement now, however. Nor is it a commentary on Judges, which would require asking *why* the final text was written, reconstructing the conditions of *each* layer's creation.³³ Herein, we want to know what Judges is doing when writing about Early Israel: to look at the "surviving structures [and] deduce the processes that produced them."³⁴ We will focus on what might seem the least historical stories in Judges: Samson's, chosen precisely for this reason; Heffelfinger, Farber, and others have done excellent work showing how history comes out in Judges 9, for instance, but the situation is somewhat simpler there.³⁵ For Samson, as Albright said of Joseph, "so perfect a story, dating moreover from hoary antiquity, can, strictly speaking, be neither history nor fiction."³⁶ Albright's words are worth quoting at length:

A priori it is impossible to decide whether a given figure is of historical or mythical origin. A categorical generalization is as rash here as elsewhere in the domain of the humanistic sciences....If heroes are set down as historical we must look for mythical analogies from which they have procured their mythic trappings... Moreover, we must allow for the operation of an unlimited number of disguising modifications and accretions. A historical personage may thus be surrounded in time with a borrowed aureole, containing perhaps even rays characteristic of the most out-and-out gods....We must not be misled, but must examine critically the precipitate left after all suspicious elements have been removed.³⁷

200 thinks it is impossible to separate the fact from fiction; These kernels of correspondence regularly emerge in "tidbits of information ... often given in ideologically unguarded moments"; John R. Huddleston, "'Who is this that rises like the Nile?' Some Egyptian Texts on the Inundation and a Prophetic Trope," in A.H. Bartlett et al. eds., *Fortunate the Eyes that See* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 340; "rejected traditions...alternative sources [that] with time, were marginalized from the dominant description of the history of Israel"; Alexander Rofè, "Clan Sagas As a Source in Settlement Traditions," in *A Wise and Discerning Mind: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*, ed. Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley, Brown Judaic Studies 325 (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 198–200; In other words, even "a text that is not trying to recount the 'real' past [might] nevertheless" actually do so; Brettler, "Method in the Application of Biblical Source Material to Historical Writing" 308.

³³ Gary Beckman, "The Limits of Credulity," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 125 (2005): 349; Knauf, "History in Joshua," 130.

³⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, First issued as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 41.

³⁵ Katie M. Heffelfinger, "'My Father Is King': Chiefly Politics and the Rise and Fall of Abimelech," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33 (2009): 277–92; Zev Farber, "Jerubaal, Jacob and the Battle for Shechem," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 13, no. art. 12 (2013).

³⁶ W. F. Albright, "Historical and Mythical Elements in the Story of Joseph," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, n.d., 111.

³⁷ Albright, 111.

Without attempting it, Burrows proposed³⁸ such work on this figure Gunkel called, “The merry butcher, Samuel.”³⁹ Even the Talmud called Samson, “Israel’s mightiest and flightiest leader” (*b. Rosh Hashanah* 25b, 26a). Already Ewald said here was a popular hero whose legends had grown by accretion.⁴⁰ Jeremias (Alfred) and Kuenen described him as mythology, legend, and history mixed,⁴¹ what Kittel called, “A motley mushroom-growth of legend concerning *ruse* and wrong of every kind.”⁴² So here, we will see *by what means* Judges writes about Early Israel.

Drawing on insights of the Church Fathers and Yigael Yadin, Othniel Margalith argued in a series of articles from the 1980s that behind Samson was an early form of the Heracles story, brought by Philistines from Greece. This idea has been repeated by Yair Zakovitch and Pnina Galpaz Feller, who waxes eloquently about “Denyen Legends” that exist only in scholarly reconstruction.⁴³ Azzan Yadin and Robert Gnuse make the same argument but think Heracles was borrowed in the Hellenistic period.⁴⁴

Yet the parallels Margalith and the others read in the text are very general. Samson’s hair that may or may not be the source of his power cannot be compared to Heracles, who according to Galpaz Feller “wore the skin of a lion and its mane looked like his hair.”⁴⁵ The voluntary death of Samson by toppling the pillars of the Temple of Dagon is not the same as Heracles uprooting trees for his own funeral pyre, and so on.⁴⁶

³⁸ Burrows, “Ancient Israel,” 102–103.

³⁹ Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis* (Chicago: Open Court, 1907), 110.

⁴⁰ Heinrich Ewald, *The History of Israel* (London: Longman, 1883), 2:402–403.

⁴¹ Alfred Jeremias, *The Old Testament in the Light of Ancient East* ([Place of publication not identified]: [publisher not identified], 1911); Abraham Kuenen, *The Religion of Israel* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874), 1:23.

⁴² Rudolf Kittel, *A History of the Hebrews* (London; New York: Williams & Norgate; G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1908), 2.92.

⁴³ Pnina Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero and the Man: The Story of Samson (Judges 13-16)* (Bern: P. Lang, 2006), 278–279; Yair Zakovitch, “The Strange Biography of Samson,” *Nordisk Judaistik* 24 (2016): 31; Yigael Yadin, “And Dan, Why Did He Remain in Ships?,” *AJBA* 1 (71 1968): 9–23.

⁴⁴ Azzan Yadin, “Samson’s HÎDÂ,” *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002): 407–426; Robert Gnuse, “Samson and Heracles Revisited,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 32 (2018): 1–19.

⁴⁵ Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero and the Man: The Story of Samson (Judges 13-16)*, 278.

⁴⁶ Christophe Lemardelé, “Samson Le Nazir,” *Revue de l’histoire Des Religions* 222 (2005): 264; Walter Vogels, *Samson: sexe, violence et religion: Judges 13-16* (Montreal: Novalis, 2006), 31. As Christopher Tolkien writes, “All this has some plausibility, but of course an abundance of contradictory theories of reduplication, blending and so on have been proposed for

Gunkel argued Samuel was a folkloric “Wild Man,” and so, recently, have Jichan Kim and Gregory Mobley.⁴⁷ After all, he has foliage for hair, eats natural foods, and avoids beer and wine (13:4, 7, 14). Of course he *does not* avoid alcohol, and that trope and his hair are part of the Nazirite motif, not that of a woodwose.⁴⁸

Désirée Mayer raises an old idea of sun-god mythology behind Samson.⁴⁹ Shimshon means “Little Shamash,” the sun, with the *-on* personal name ending.⁵⁰ Beth-Shemesh, the Temple of Shamash, preserved in the Arabic Ain Shams, features prominently in the Samson narratives (Judg 13:2, 25; 14:4; 16:31).⁵¹ If the Timnah that is home to Samson’s wife in 14:1 is the same as Timnath-Heres of Judg 2:9, the name means “Portion of the Sun.”⁵²

The sun-god Shamash in Mesopotamian texts is regularly called a judge - in terms cognate to both *shofet*, which of the Major Judges only Samson, Deborah, and Othniel bear, and *din* (Akk *dayānnu*),⁵³ the root at least in folk etymology of Dan, Samson’s tribe and home (Gen 49:16). Thus, “Judge of heaven and earth... You judge the case of the wronged man and woman...O Shamash, you are the judge...Judge my case, provide my verdict.”⁵⁴ Such epithets appear in countless incantations, prayers, and hymns, going back to Sumerian Utu counterparts and

every [biblical] legend; they can rarely be proved or disproved, and often, as in this case, the possibilities are almost inexhaustible.” Christopher Tolkien, trans., *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, Icelandic Texts (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, n.d.), xvii.

⁴⁷ Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 453 (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 217–233; Jichan Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), 35–44.

⁴⁸ Vogels, *Samson*, 32; Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*, 21 already acknowledges Samson lacks multiple wildman qualities such as lack of speech.

⁴⁹ Already Burney and Kuenen’s suggestion; Désirée Mayer, “Samson, Ou l’anamorphose Du Récit,” *Sémiotique et Bible* 93 (March 1999); This is not a matter of a myth-ridden ANE giving way to non-mythic, history-based Israel, as per Amit, *History and Ideology: Introduction to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible*, 34–35; this old nostrum of the Biblical Theology Movement has been long disproven.

⁵⁰ Lemardelé, “Samson Le Nazir,” 265.

⁵¹ A. Smyth Palmer, *The Samson-Saga and its Place in Comparative Religion* (London: Isaac Pitman, 1913), 23.

⁵² Or, if *tmnh* reflects *šmn*₄, “Eighth of the Sun,” perhaps an eighth of a year; David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 133; Jean Hoftijzer et al., *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, Handbuch Der Orientalistik, 1.21 (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1995), 2.1163–64, 1222.

⁵³ Alan Lenzi, ed., *Reading Akkadian Prayers and Hymns: An Introduction*, Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Near East Monographs 3 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 206.

⁵⁴ Lenzi, 212 lines 20–32, also 382 lines 15–16.

into the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods.⁵⁵ Shamash also rejoices in drinking alcohol (*COS* 419).

Fire like the sun features prominently four times in the Samson stories: the foxes, the burning of his wife and father-in-law (15:6-8), his fetters disappearing as flax in fire (15:14), the seven bowstrings broken as thread breaks at contact of flame (16:9) ...even the fire that consumes his parents' offering.⁵⁶ Regardless of whether the *šū'al* is fox or jackal—in Akkadian *šalibum* / *talabum* is fox; Arabic *ta'lab* is both, as well as a word for “dry straw,” while *as'la* [لعشأ] means “to burn / flame.” Foxes are often associated with fire; Greeks called them *lampouris*, torch-tail (Aeschylus, Theocritus, Lycophron). In Ovid's *Fasti* (4.687-954), the sun god causes foxes (the “red ones”) to burn up fields of grain. Sha'alebim is a town in Dan, according to Josh 19:42. Delitzsch and Kittel were the first to point out the folk etymology of Delilah from *Layla*, night.⁵⁷

The gateposts Samson inexplicably carries all the way from Philistia to Hebron in Judges 16 may relate to the gateposts of heaven Shamash opens in devotional poetry.⁵⁸ That Israelite cosmology had such pillars is clear from 1 Sam 2:8; Ps 104:5; and Job 26:11.⁵⁹ In Num 13:22, Hebron is the home of the three giants Sheshay, Ahiman, and Talmai, the subjects as I have argued elsewhere of a free-floating Israelite oral tradition now largely lost to us.⁶⁰ Moreover, Sheshay is a variant of Shamash, since a Persian-period bilingual text (*CIS* 2.65) from Babylon matches Aramaic *Ki-shawash* with Akkadian *ki-Shamash*.⁶¹

The jawbone of an ass is variously a weapon of Shamash, Gilgamesh, Marduk, and Heracles. We have archaeological examples of flints inserted into actual jawbones for use as sickles and images of such on Old Kingdom wall reliefs.

⁵⁵ Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005), 728–732, 827; Leonard William King, Oswald Loretz, and Werner R. Mayer, *Babylonian Magic and Sorcery: Being 'The Prayers of the Lifting of the Hand,'* Alter Orient und Altes Testament 34 (Munster: Ugarit Verlag, 1978), 6; A. Falkenstein and Wolfram Von Soden, *Sumerische und akkadische Hymnen und Gebete*, Bibliothek der alten Welt (Stuttgart: Artemis, 1953), 222.

⁵⁶ Palmer, *The Samson-Saga and its Place in Comparative Religion*, 108.

⁵⁷ Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, Clark's Foreign Theological Library n.s. 36–37 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 1.83.

⁵⁸ E.g., Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 741; Augustine already linked them to gateposts of dawn in Sermon 364.5.

⁵⁹ Vogels, *Samson*, 30.

⁶⁰ Robert D. Miller II, *Oral Tradition in Ancient Israel*, Biblical Performance Criticism 4 (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), 81.

⁶¹ Rofé, “Clan Sagas As a Source in Settlement Traditions,” 195.

Perhaps the author of Judges did not understand this and so introduced a random ass head lying around for Samson to pick up. However, it does raise the possibility that Samson also contains something of Gilgamesh, as Morris Jastrow argued long ago.⁶² Gilgamesh appears on a 3rd-millennium seal wrestling like Samson in Judg 15:8. Gilgamesh is also called a judge and strangles a lion.⁶³ Nevertheless, there are far too many opportunities for Gilgamesh to have entered Israelite literary consciousness to lay Samson's origins at Bethel under the Babylonians, as does Philippe Guillaume.⁶⁴

We should also note the elements of folklore Judges has used in the Samson story. By "folklore" is meant international plots known all over the world that are not the products of diffusion,⁶⁵ plots known all over the world that are not the products of diffusion. They need not be narrative, as they can jump genres. Vladimir Propp is of great value here, although not if we pretend, as many biblical scholars do, that his thinking stopped with *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928 (ET 1958). The 1960s culmination of his work was not translated until the 2000s, so his application by Greimas, Dundes, and a host of biblical scholars is constrained.

The late Propp's folktale is a story that is distinct by its poetics (compositional and stylistic structure), its orality, its entertainment purpose, and its unusual but everyday theme: the supernatural drawn into orbit of ordinary life; events far from possible depicted realistically.⁶⁶ Among its characteristic elements: the characters are introduced and then, e.g., "Old people are childless; they pray for the birth of a son. The hero is born in some miraculous way."⁶⁷ Things happen three times;⁶⁸ for Samson, three paramours, three days Philistines can't solve a riddle, three times Delilah pleads, as well as 30 groomsmen, garments, changes

⁶² Morris Jastrow, *The Study of Religion* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981), 264; Morris Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylon and Assyria*. (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1898), 561; Lemardelé, "Samson Le Nazir," 266.

⁶³ Lemardelé, "Samson Le Nazir," 269–170.

⁶⁴ Philippe Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah: The Judges*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplements (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 144–197.

⁶⁵ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory*, New Perspectives on the Past (Oxford; Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1992), 62–71; Frog, "Mythology in Cultural Practice: A Methodological Framework for Historical Analysis," *Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter* 10 (2015): 33–57; Frog, "Revisiting the Historical-Geographic Method(s)," *Retrospective Methods Network Newsletter* 7 (2013).

⁶⁶ Vladimir Jakovlevic Propp, *The Russian Folktale*, trans. Sibelan Forrester (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 226–229.

⁶⁷ Propp, 152.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 175, 273; See examples in Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, x.

of garment, and slain men of Ashkelon, 300 foxes, 3000 men of Judah who come to Rock of Etam, and 3000 dead at end in 16:27.⁶⁹ Propp's list includes a journey away from home accompanied by prohibitions that get violated;⁷⁰ winning the girl, marriage, and then the "onset of complications";⁷¹ "struggle with religious prejudices";⁷² "making cruel fun of one's opponents";⁷³ and "the harshest jests of a joker,"⁷⁴ who "brings people to crime and death with his deceptions; he provokes fires and ruin—and all with a belly laugh of schadenfreude."⁷⁵ All of this is in Samson. Riddles associated with weddings are very common in folklore.⁷⁶ Riddles that are "unfair" because they can only be solved by an eyewitness to a cryptically described occurrence are also common,⁷⁷ as are riddles of the "what is sweeter than" variety.⁷⁸

Like Alexander the Great with his medieval Romance cycle and Charlemagne with the *Song of Roland*, Samson has accumulated a plethora of both folklore and mythology. "Whole cycles of romances are bodily taken over and applied to other heroes than those of whom they were originally composed."⁷⁹ "Thus one supreme figure drew to itself stories of all sorts...and these stories eventually formed what is known as a cycle of romance. The various cycles which thus grew up have all a great resemblance to one another."⁸⁰

⁶⁹ Palmer, *Samson-Saga and Its Place in Comparative Religion*, 199.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, *The Russian Folktale*, 153.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 265.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁷⁶ n.a., "Enigmas de Boudaq" *Revue Des Traditions Populaires* 12 (1897): 603; Victor Chauvin, *Bibliographie des ouvrages arabes ou relatifs aux Arabes publiés dans l'Europe chrétienne de 1810 à 1885*. 5, 5, (Liege: Vaillant-Carmanne, 1901), 191–193.

⁷⁷ Inea. Bushnaq, *Arab Folk-Tales* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1987), 28–30; Raphael. Patai, *Arab Folktales from Palestine and Israel* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1998), 109–115; Hasan M. El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 76–81.

⁷⁸ J. Scelles-Millie, *Contes arabes du Maghreb*, Collection documentaire de Folklore 11 (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1970), 146–151. More exact parallels where the man reveals the secret of the riddle to his lover are known from the Philippines; n.a., 'Juan the Student', *Journal of American Folklore*, n.d., 104–105.

⁷⁹ Moses Gaster, "The Legend of Merlin," *FL*, 1905, 409.

⁸⁰ H. A. Guerber, *Myths & Legends of the Middle Ages* (London: George G. Harrap & Company, 1909), 369.

Alexander and Charlemagne remain historical figures, nevertheless.⁸¹ There is Early Iron Age in Samson. Shimshon appears as Shmashna on a Rameses II Karnak list as a location south of Dan: Ir Shemesh already in the Late Bronze Age. While we cannot speak of a Philistine Heracles tale borrowed by Israel, the mythological elements of Samson go back to at least the Early Settlement, and the famous lion seal from Iron I Beth Shemesh supports this. Notice “at least”; elements of Samson could be *pre*-Israelite. As Hélène Adeline Guerber wrote about the Duke Aymon traditions in the Matter of France, “These ballads are *at least as old* as the events which they were intended to record.”⁸² Still, “However old the voice may be that we hear in these lines, they contain a legend, not ‘history’ as we understand it. But the matter of legend has roots,” and those are old.⁸³

Mark Leuchter and others agree that placing the tribe of Dan in the South is a relic of extremely ancient tradition. In the old Song of Deborah, Dan has seaports (Judg 5:17).⁸⁴ Yet “Dan to Beersheba” is the biblical idiom, and even the Blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy knows Dan to be in the far North. Jacob’s Blessing in Genesis 49, however, another archaic poem, puts Dan as “an adder in the path,” that is, of an invading army on the coastal highway, not out of the way in Upper Galilee.

Steve Weitzman argues the Samson narrative is an attempt to impose a border between Judah and the Philistines in the Shephelah, not only reflecting the ethnic and cultural ambiguities of the region but also trying to assert control over them.⁸⁵ He is correct to an extent, although it represents a hindsight view of the “ethnic” situation. Bruno Clifton, however, has pointed out that the only references to Israel in the Samson cycle are in the editorial frame (13:1; 15:20; 16:31) or in the editorial aside discussed below.⁸⁶ While on the one hand, one might conclude this is due to the material being folkloristic, independent of any ethnic specificity, Clifton argues that it exemplifies the local, here Dan-centered,

⁸¹ Palmer, *The Samson-Saga and its Place in Comparative Religion*, 29, 231.

⁸² Guerber, *Myths & Legends of the Middle Ages*, 199.

⁸³ Cf. Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, xxv.

⁸⁴ Harold A. Kay, “The Song of Deborah (Judges, Ch. 5)” (Diss., St. Andrew’s University, 1984), 398–402; Mark Leuchter, “The Cult at Kiriath Yearim,” *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008): 526–543; Mark W. Bartusch, “Understanding Dan: An Exegetical Study of a Biblical City, Tribe and Ancestor” (Sheffield Acad. Press, 2003), 111–112, /z-wcorg/.

⁸⁵ Steve Weitzman, “The Samson Story as Border Fiction,” *Biblical Interpretation* 10 (1 April 2002): 158–174.

⁸⁶ Bruno J. Clifton, *Family and Identity in the Book of Judges* (Diss., Cambridge University, 2018), 89.

nature of these stories he devotes his entire study to, stories which emerge from a time before Israelite national unity was significant.

Nevertheless, within the Samson stories, we also have the most historically accurate statements about Early Iron Age *Israel* in the entire book of Judges.⁸⁷ One is a rhetorical question in Judg 15:11 the men of Judah pose to Samson after he had upset the delicate status quo and fragile conditions of Philistine occupation. His actions were sure to bring Philistine reprisals unless Samson surrendered: “Don’t you realize that we’re [i.e., Judah⁸⁸] under the control of the Philistines?”⁸⁹ The editor has understood (correctly) this Judahite statement to apply to the whole of the land of Israel in the simple statement of fact in Judg 14:4, “At that time the Philistines had control of Israel.” Philistine control extended over several portions of proto-Israel in the 11th century.

Other historical pieces in Samson are not so easy to place precisely. Two Philistine temples - at Tel Qasile and Tell es-Safi Gath - are apparently supported by only two pillars. Of course, there could be unexcavated examples from other periods, and “the author...takes pleasure in the antiquarian as well as in the more specifically historical. His attempt to describe the temple... illustrates the fascination which the past held...much better than it records [Philistine] customs, and...the author’s gothic imagination is excitedly at work.”⁹⁰ Samson’s punishment of binding, blinding, and grinding finds precise

⁸⁷ Robert D. Miller II, “Early Israel and Its Appearance in Canaan,” in *Ancient Israel’s History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources*, ed. Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).

⁸⁸ Clifton, “Family and Identity in the Book of Judges,” 89 n.101.

⁸⁹ Forty-seven Philistine bichrome sherds were found at Iron I Tell en-Nasbeh (J. A. Graham, “New Light on the Fortress; and Iron I at Tell el-Ful,” in *The Third Campaign at Tell el-Ful*; AASOR 45 (Cambridge, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1981), 33). Neutron activation has found that two painted kraters and other body sherds were actually manufactured at Ashdod (Gunnweg, J.; F. Asaro; H. V. Michel; and I. Perlman, “Interregional Contacts between Tell en-Nasbeh and littoral Philistine centers in Canaan during Early Iron Age I,” *Archaeometry* 36 (1994): 235). This is clear evidence for trade. Yet, another six painted kraters of similar typology, along with more body sherds, were made locally (Gunnweg et al., 231, 238). Someone was making Philistine pottery in the middle of the highland settlement. Yet, Tell en-Nasbeh Stratum 4 was unfortified and cannot possibly have been a Philistine “garrison” in hostile Israelite territory. Yet, here was locally made Philistine bichrome, along with imported Philistine ware, to which can be added a Philistine piece with an Aegean-inspired swan decoration (W. F. Badè, “Excavation of Tell en-Nasbeh,” *BASOR* 26 (1927): 6) and several Phoenician globular jugs (C. Briese, “Frühisenzeitliche Bemalte Phönizische Kannen von Fundplätzen der Levanteküste,” *Hamburger Beiträge zur Archaeologie* 12 (1985): 14).

⁹⁰ Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards, trans. *Eyrbyggja Saga* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 25.

parallels in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian texts: the threatened fate of King Rusa of Shupria should Esarhaddon capture him (Ash 68.2.18-20), once under Assurbanipal (*KAI* 233.8, an Aramaic letter from a private archive in Assur), and Zedekiah's fate in Jer 52:11, but also in Old Babylonian texts from Ur (UET 5.9.17-22).⁹¹

This says nothing about a historical personage named Samson, and that is not what this essay claims.⁹² Editing what J. R. R. Tolkien wrote about the Lombard King of the Angles, Scaefa: "There are...traditions of a mythical (not the same as eponymous and fictitious) [hero] called [Samson]. He was [a] blending...of the eponymous ancestor...with the more mysterious, far older and more poetical myths...but the legend here catches echoes of heroic traditions of [Early Israel] going back into [the Iron I period]."⁹³

Here, too, the book's *theology* or that of its various editors has shaped the Samson cycle,⁹⁴ just as the peculiar character of various Alexander legends were adapted to religious needs of the Muslim or Christian writers of the romances.⁹⁵ Specifically, Samson is symbolic of Israel: he is consecrated at birth, whores after foreign gods, only calls out in crisis to God, while God remains faithful to his covenant and in control.⁹⁶

Let us drop the entire equation: early=history; late=legend. The Samson Cycle contains elements of mythology and legend that are old, that go back to the Early Israelite Settlement or beyond. The author of these chapters of Judges knows Dan was in the South and the Philistines ruled Israel in the late 11th century, thanks to his own research.⁹⁷ His method involves—like the later Alexander Romances, the Song of Roland, and if Jeffrey Tigay is right, Gilgamesh

⁹¹ Karel Van der Toorn, "Judges XVI 21 in the Light of the Akkadian Sources," *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 249–250.

⁹² In some Alexander Romances, "every trace of genuine history is effectively obliterated. Even the name of Alexander's mother is changed into Galopatria, i.e. Cleopatra"; Moses Gaster, "An Old Hebrew Romance of Alexander," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1897): 491.

⁹³ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lost Road and Other Writings: Language and Legend Before 'The Lord of the Rings'*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, *The History of Middle-Earth* 5 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 94–95.

⁹⁴ Emphasis is on the 'Various'; Mayes, 'Deuteronomistic Royal Ideology in Judges 17-21'.

⁹⁵ Gaster, "An Old Hebrew Romance of Alexander," 488–489.

⁹⁶ Edward Greenstein, *Samson-A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 201–208; Barry G. Webb, "The Book of Judges (NICOT)," 2013; Mark Greene, "Enigma Variations: Aspects of the Samson Story Judges 13-16," *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 79–80.

⁹⁷ Ben Zvi, "Clio Today and Ancient Israelite History."

- an interweaving of history, legend, and mythology.⁹⁸ There is no reason to think he knew what was which.

Professor Robert D. Miller
School of Theology
The Catholic University of America
Department of Old Testament
University of Pretoria

millerb@cua.edu

⁹⁸ Robert Morrissey, *Charlemagne & France: A Thousand Years of Mythology*, Laura Shannon Series in French Medieval Studies (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 14; Haila Manteghi, *Alexander the Great in the Persian Tradition: History, Myth and Legend in Medieval Iran*, 2018; Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Wauconda, Ill.: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2002), 15.