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The Samson Cycle in an Oral Setting

> We proceed from the insight that the Bible stems from living recitation and is intended for living recitation, that its true existence may be found in speech, that writing ("Scripture") is merely its form of preservation.
>
> —Martin Buber[1]

In recent years scholars have begun to apply the findings of researchers in oral and epic literature such as Olrik, Propp, and Lord[2] to the narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible. While at this stage a great deal still remains to be clarified, it is now conceded by many that the Bible bears traces, strong at times, of oral composition.[3] Structural characteristics—particularly the use of stylization and repetition—seem to point to a tradition, the transmission of which was fluid in its early stages. The oral nature of the text was taken for granted during the Biblical period itself; one need only glance at the command given to Joshua (Joshua 1:8): "Let not this Book of the Teaching depart from your mouth,/recite (more properly: murmur) it day and night. . . ./then will you make your way succeed." The practice of keeping the text alive in recitation, at the same time that written copies existed, was scrupulously followed by Jews, not only in Talmudic and medieval times, but in some cases into the modern period as well.

It is therefore both surprising and ironic that translators over the past several centuries have by and large treated the Bible as if it were a purely written document. In the West it is known as "Scripture" or "Writ"; it is described as a *text* rather than as a work which is to be spoken and heard.[4] Translators have consciously or unconsciously tried to convince their audiences that Biblical narrative resembles conventional prose. In the past two decades in particular, they have aimed at a lucid and "readable" English style, whose purpose is to transmit the message of a given text, without much regard for the form in which it is cast. In the process, a good dealing of inner substance has been translated out.

Students of folklore and traditional literatures are well aware of the interdependence of form and content in such literature. Through the oral poet's feeling for sounds, and only through it, the religious experience allows itself to be grasped and, if the art is of a high level, reproduced. The combining of meaningful phrases, allusions, words pregnant with associative value, provides a mechanism for the transmission of a sacred event in the life of a people which would otherwise be lost.

This experience is rarely a living one any more in the West. Indeed, it would be naive to expect that a renewal of the sacred, or of the oral means by which the sacred has frequently been apprehended, will take place in the forseeable future. For the moment, then, there remains only one criterion for assessing the validity of an oral approach to the Bible. We may cast it in the form of a question: To what extent can techniques of oral-textual analysis add measurably to our understanding of the text?

There are strong indications from the past that such an approach can be fruitful. Traditional Jewish exegesis often made use of concepts of repetition, word-play, and other forms of interpretation, and in general regarded its externally wide-ranging subject matter as organic and interconnected. But a systematic approach to the Bible, specifically informed by the principles of oral literature study, has not emerged until the twentieth century—in various commentaries and primarily in one translation.[5]

Beginning in 1925, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig undertook a German translation of the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible.[6] As the project evolved, it became clear to the translators that their goal should be the recreation of the spoken aspect of the text, thus also making it possible for the reader to sense and search for the self-interpretative power of the original. Accepting the reality that one cannot

determine precisely where the Bible lies on the spectrum from prose to poetry, Buber and Rosenzweig pressed for recognition of a third, intermediate form, rather different from anything that exists in Western literature outside the theater.[7] This they accomplished by setting out the text in cola, in "breathing-lines" which were to coincide with units of meaning. In addition, they adopted with precision the text's use of repetition, avoided by most translations as stylistically inelegant, in order to make clear the mechanism through which the ancient hearer "got the message" of the text. The Buber-Rosenzweig rendition dramatically demonstrates the Bible's use of allusion through sound, by means of which elements in a story, a cycle of stories, throughout a book, or even between separate books, link up in a manner that can only be termed organic. The units of this technique were termed "leading-words" by Buber; they are the key to understanding the Samson cycle as well as other texts.[8]

A brief example may serve as a preliminary illustration of the working out of these principles in Biblical narrative. The well-known story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 presents considerable problems of interpretation when taken on its own. In the larger context of the Abraham cycle, however, an important structural function of the story becomes apparent. Genesis 22 points back to the beginning of the Abraham stories in Genesis 12; the first and last tests to which Abraham is subjected are presented in parallel terms. This is brought out by means of the sound structure:

HE said to Avram:
Go-you-forth
from your land
from your kindred
from your father's house
to the land which I will lelt you see. (Gen. 12:1)

After these events it was
that God tested Abraham
and said to him: . . . .
Now take your son
your only-one
whom you love,
Yitzhak,
and go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya,
and offer him up there for an offering-up
upon one of the mountains
which I will tell you of. (Gen. 22:1, 2)

Read aloud, the connections become clear, from the repeated "go-you-forth" (a form which occurs nowhere else in Genesis), to the groups of three (describing first Abraham's homeland and then Isaac), to the equivalent phrases, "which I will let you see/which I will tell you of." In simplest terms, we are meant to draw the parallel between Abraham's first journey, where he is asked to abandon the past, and his last one, where a demand is made upon him which will entail giving up the future.

These connections reverberate in the original, but if one reads a contemporary translation, they fade into the realm of the literary critic's tools of psychology.

Yahweh said to Abram,

"Go forth from your native land
And from your father's home
To a land that I will show you."

Some time afterwards, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, . . . "Take your son, your beloved one, Isaac whom you hold so dear, and go to the land of Moriah, where you shall offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."[9]

Such a translation is an unnecessary distance from the original. In its effort to be stylistically acceptable, it glosses over the inner form and hence over much of the implied content.

The stories which have been collected around the figure of Samson (Judges 13-16) provide a stunning example of oral influence in the Bible. Although this cycle may be related to the strong-man tales of the Aegean peoples, and although it may have consisted at some point of different Israelite traditions, it has come down to us as a unity whose elements are almost totally interrelated.[10] By means of thematic, formulaic, and word repetition, the Biblical editor has woven his material into a remarkable tapestry. At the same time, he has given us the mechanism by which the text may be unraveled and hence understood. Using a rendition along the lines of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation, in which this mechanism is reproduced along with the story line, it should be possible for the English reader to participate fully in the process of interpretation. Such a rendition follows.

By way of introduction to the text, it should be noted that the Samson cycle is set at the end of the Second

Millenium B.C., in the "heroic" period of ancient Israel. Like the stories which surround it in the Book of Judges, it seeks to recount the divine deliverance of the kingless Israelites from their oppressors. In the eyes of the Biblical historian, of course, the oppression has taken place because the people have foresaken God. Here, however, the similarity between the Samson material and the rest of the book ends, and one is confronted with a strange figure. Samson, unlike his colleagues, is neither a military leader nor a religious charismatic. He is instead a man obsessed with his own private (in this case, sexual) concerns, and he becomes a part of a larger historical picture only on their account—that is to say, quite accidentally. Not even at the heroic moment of his death does he see himself as the other Judges do, as a representative of God.

The issue is further clouded by the centrality of the institution of Naziriteship—being "One Consecrated to God"—in the stories. According to Numbers 6, a man may take an "extraordinary" vow, abstaining from alcohol, letting his hair grow, and avoiding contact with the dead.[11] Not only is Samson a Nazirite by another's choice (God's), not only is his term for life, but he seems to act in utter disregard of the vow. This strange mixture of the religious and the secular, which underscores the Samson cycle, needs clarification.

A close analysis of the oral aspects of the text will reveal its intent and place within Biblical literature, as well as its internal cohesion. First, however, the reader should be allowed to hear the text in its entirety, and given the opportunity to sense the inner connections of the story. The English rendition is based on the Hebrew text as understood in an early (c. 1934) and late (1968) edition of the Buber-Rosenzweig version of Judges. I have introduced some changes, made necessary either by the demands of English or by my disagreement with the translators. I have maintained their translation of the divine name YHWH by means of capitalized personal pronouns; they felt that this best reflected the sense of the numinous with which the name was pronounced in antiquity. The episodic divisions which I have imposed upon the text are by no means absolute; I have adopted them for the sake of convenient reference in my subsequent analysis of the text.

As with any translation of such a text, this rendition should be considered only one particular "performance."

I

Now the Children of Israel continued to do what was ill in HIS eyes,
so he gave them into the hand of the Philistines (for) forty years.

There was a man for Tzor'a, from the clan of Dan,
his name was Manoah,
his wife was barren—she had not borne.
Now HIS messenger let himself be seen by the woman and said to her:
Now heed,
you are barren—you have not borne,
but you shall conceive—you shall bear a son,
so then, now guard yourself well,
do not drink wine or intoxicant,
do not eat anything tainted,
for heed, you are about to conceive,
you shall bear a son:
a razor must not go upon his head,
for the boy shall be One Consecrated to God

from the womb on,
he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.
The woman came and said to her husband, said:
A man of God came to me,
the sight of him like the sight of a messenger of God,
exceedingly fearsome,
I did not ask where he was from,
his name he did not tell me,
but he said to me: Take heed,
you are about to conceive—you shall bear a son,
so then:
do not drink wine or intoxicant,
do not eat any kind of tainted-food,
for the boy shall be One Consecrated to God
from the womb until the day of his death.
Manoah entreated HIM, he said:
O my Lord,
now may the man of God whom you have sent come to us again
and instruct us as to what we are to do with the boy who will be born.
God hearkened to the voice of Manoah,
God's messenger came to the woman again,
now she was sitting there in the field, her husband Manoah was not with her.
Quickly the woman ran and told it to her husband, she said to him:
Heed, the man who came to me during the day has let himself be seen by me.
Manoah arose and went after his wife,
he came to the man and said to him:
Are you the man who spoke to the woman?
He said:
I am.
Manoah said:
So then, should your words come to pass,
what will be the manner of the boy and his deeds?
HIS messenger said to Manoah:
From all of which I spoke to the woman she shall guard herself,
from all which comes from the vine she shall not eat,
wine and intoxicant she must not drink,
all things tainted she must not eat,
all that I have commanded her, she shall guard.
Manoah said to HIS messenger:
Now may we detain you
to prepare a goat-kid for you?
HIS messenger said to Manoah:
If you detain me, I will not eat of your food,
but if you wish to prepare an offering-up for HIM, you may offer it up.
For Manoah did not know that he was HIS messenger.

Manoah said to HIS messenger:
What is your name?
—that we may honor you, should your words come to pass.
HIS messenger said to him:
Why do you ask about my name,
for it is extraordinary!
Manoah took the goat-kid and the gift
and offered it up on the rock-slope to HIM.
He did extraordinarily—Manoah and his wife saw it:
it was,
when the flame went upward from the altar to heaven:
HIS messenger went up in the flame of the altar.
Manoah and his wife saw it,
they fell upon their faces to the earth.
HIS messenger was henceforth seen no more by Manoah and his wife,
but now Manoah knew that he was HIS messenger.
Manoah said to his wife:
We are going to die, yes, die,
for we have seen Godhood!
His wife said to him:
Had HE desired to have us die
he would not have taken offering and gift from our hand,
he would not have let us see all this,
at that moment, he would not have let us hear in that way.

The woman bore a son,
she called his name Shimshon.
The boy grew up, and HE blessed him.
And HIS spirit began to stir him up
in the camp of Dan, between Tzor'a and Eshtaol.

II

Shimshon went down to Timna,
he saw a woman in Timna from the daughters of the Philistines,
he came up again and told it to his father and to his mother, he said:
I have seen a woman in Timna from the daughters of the Philistines,
so then, take her for me as a wife.
His father and his mother said to him:
Is there no woman among the daughters of your brothers and among all my people,
that you must go and take a woman from the Philistines, the Foreskinned-Ones?
Shimshon said to his father:
Take *her* for me, for she is right in my eyes.
Now his father and his mother did not know that it was from HIM,

that he was seeking an opportunity from the Philistines,
—at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.
Shimshon went down with his father and his mother to Timna,
they had come as far as the vineyards of Timna,
when here: a young lion, roaring to meet them!
HIS spirit rushed upon him,
and he ripped him up as one rips up a kid,
without a thing in his hand.
Now he did not tell his father and his mother what he had done.
He went down, he spoke to the woman,
yes, she is right in Shimshon's eyes.
He returned after some days to take her (to wife).
He turned aside to see the fallen lion,
and here: a swarm of bees in the lion's body, and honey!
He scraped it off into the palm of his hand.
He went, and ate as he went.
He went back to his father and to his mother,
he gave them, and they ate.
But he did not tell them that he had scraped the honey from the lion's body.
His father went down on account of the woman.
They made Shimshon a drinking-meal there, for that is what young men do:
it was when they saw him, that thirty feasting-companions took him in and remained with him.
Shimshon said to them:
Now let me riddle you a riddle!
If you can tell, tell me the answer during the seven days of the meal,
and can get it,
I will give you thirty linen shirts and thirty outfits of clothes.
But if you are not able to tell me the answer,
you will have to give me thirty linen shirts and thirty outfits of clothes.
They said to him:
Riddle your riddle, we will hear it!
He said to them:
Out of the feeder came food,
out of the fierce one came sweets.
They could not tell him the riddle's answer for three days.
And then on the fourth day it was that they said to Shimshon's wife:
Entice your husband, that he may tell us the riddle's answer,
otherwise we will burn you and your father's house with fire—
have you called us here to disinherit us?
Shimshon's wife wept over him, she said:
You only hate me, you do not love me,
you have riddled the riddle to the sons of my people
and have not told its answer to me!
He said to her:

But here, I have not told it to my father and to my mother—
shall I then tell it to you?
She wept over him for the seven days during which they held the drinking-meal,
then it was—on the seventh day—that he told it to her, for she was pressing
him hard,
and she told the riddle's answer to the sons of her people.
The men of the city said to him
on the seventh day, before the sun had come in:
What is sweeter than honey?
What is fiercer than a lion?
He said to them:
If you had not ploughed with my heifer,
you would not have gotten my riddle!
HIS spirit rushed upon him,
he went down to Ashkelon,
he struck down thirty men of them,
took their armaments,
and gave them as outfits to those who had told the riddle's answer.
Still his anger fumed,
and he went up to his father's house.
Shimshon's wife was (given) to one of his fellow-companions
who had been his fellow-wooer.

III

It was after some days, in the days of the wheat-cutting,
that Shimshon visited his wife with a goat-kid,
he said: I will come to my wife in the chamber.
But her father did not give him leave to come in.
Her father said:
I said (to myself), said:
Indeed, you bear hatred, hatred towards her,
so I gave her to your fellow,—
but is not her sister more good-looking than she?
now let her be yours in her place!
Shimshon said to them:
This time I will be more blameless than the Philistines,
if I do ill with them!
Shimshon went,
he caught three hundred foxes,
he took torches,
wound tail to tail,
placed each torch between the two tails, in the middle,
ignited fire in the torches,

and set them loose in the stalks of the Philistines;
he ignited from sheaf to stalk and from vineyard to olive-grove.
The Philistines said:
Who has done this?
They said:
Shimshon, the son-in-law of the Timnite,
for he took away his wife and gave her to his fellow.
The Philistines went up and burned her and her father with fire.
Shimshon said to them:
Is this what you do?
When I have revenged myself upon you,
only afterwards will I stop!
He struck them down, hip and thigh,
a great striking-down,
he went and settled in the gorge of Etam's Rock.

IV

The Philistines went up and encamped in Judah,
they spread out at Lehi.
The men of Judah said:
Why have you come up against us?
They said:
We have come up to bind Shimshon,
to do to him as he has done to us.
Three thousand men from Judah went down to the gorge of Etam's Rock
and said to Shimshon:
Do you know that the Philistines have dominion over us?
what then are you doing to us?
He said to them:
As they have done to me, so I have done to them.
They said to him:
We have come down to bind you, to give you into the hand of the Philistines.
Shimshon said to them:
Swear to me that you do not want to come at me yourselves.
They said to him, said:
No,
we want to bind you, yes, bind you,
but death, we do not want your death.
They bound him with two new ropes,
and led him up from the rocky ground.
He had come as far as Lehi,
the Philistines shouted meeting him,

and HIS spirit rushed upon him;
the ropes which were upon his arms
became like threads of flax which one ignites with fire,
his bonds melted away from his hands.
He found a fresh jawbone of an ass,
he stretched out his hand and took it
and struck down a thousand men with it.
Shimshon said:
With the jawbone of an ass,
heaping mass upon mass,
with the jawbone of an ass
I have struck a thousand men!
It was when he had finished speaking:
he threw the jawbone from his hand,
—so they called that place Ramat Lehi/Jawbone Hill.
He was exceedingly thirsty, and he called out to HIM, and said:
You yourself have given into your servant's hand
this great deliverance,
so now shall I, dying of thirst,
fall into the hand of the Foreskinned-Ones?
God split open the cavity which was in Jawbone Rock,
water came out it, and he drank,
his spirit returned, and he revived.
Therefore they called its name Spring of the Caller,
which originates in Lehi,
until this very day.
He judged Israel in the days of the Philistines, for twenty years.

V

Shimshon went to Gaza ,
there he saw a woman, a whore, and came to her.
Among the Gazites it was said:
Shimshon has come here!
They circled around and set an ambush for him the whole night at the city gate,
they kept quiet the whole night, they said:
Until morning-light! Then we will kill him!
Shimshon lay until midnight,
he arose at midnight,
he seized the doors of the city gate
along with the two posts,
he pulled them up, together with the bolt,
took them upon his shoulders
and brought them up to the top of the mountain which faces Hevron.

VI

It was after this
that he fell in love with a woman in the Wady of Vines,
her name was Delila.
The Philistine tyrants went up to her and said to her:
Entice him and see
whereby his might is so great,
whereby we can overcome him,
that we may be able to bind him, to humble him,
and we ourselves, each man, will give you a hundred and a thousand pieces
of silver.
Delila said to Shimshon:
Now tell me,
whereby is your might so great,
whereby can you be bound, to humble you?
Shimshon said to her:
If they bind me with seven
damp gut-strings, which have not been dried,
I become weak,
I become like
one of humankind.
The Philistine tyrants brought up to her seven gut-strings,
damp ones, which had not been dried,
and she bound him with them.
Now the ambush was sitting for her in the chamber.
She said to him:
Philistines upon you, Shimshon!
He burst the strings,
as hempen cord bursts when it smells fire.
And his might was not made known.
Delila said to Shimshon:
Here, you have made of me a fool,
you have spoken lies to me,
O tell me now,
whereby can you be bound?
He said to her:
If they bind me, yes, bind me with ropes,
new ones, with which no work has been done,
I become weak,
I become like
one of humankind.
Delila took new ropes
and she bound him with them,
and she said to him:

Philistines upon you, Shimshon!
Now the ambush was sitting in the chamber.
He burst them
from upon his arms like a thread.
Delila said to Shimshon:
Until now you have made of me a fool,
you have spoken lies to me,
tell me:
whereby can you be bound?
He said to her:
If you weave
the seven locks of my head
in the loom....
She made them tight with the pin,
then she said to him:
Philistines upon you, Shimshon!
He awoke from his sleep
and tore apart the pin, the web, and the loom.
She said to him:
How can you say: I love you,
when your heart is not with me!
Three times now you have made of me a fool,
you have not told me
whereby your might is so great!
It was
when she had pressed him hard with her speeches every day
and had tormented him, so that his soul was cramped to death:
he told her all his heart,
he said to her:
No razor has gone upon my head,
for I have been One Consecrated to God from my mother's womb on:
If I am shaven,
my might leaves me,
I become weak,
I become like
all of humankind.
Delila saw
that he had told her all his heart,
she sent and called the Philistine tyrants together, saying:
Come up this time,
for he has told me all his heart.
The Philistine tyrants went up to her,
they brought the silver in their hand.
She lulled him to sleep upon her knees,
called for a man and had the seven locks of his head shaven off,

she began his humbling,
and his might left him.
She said:
Philistines upon you, Shimshon!
He awoke from his sleep,
he said to himself:
I will get away as (I did) time after time,
I will shake myself free!
He did not know that HE had left him.
The Philistines seized him,
they dug out his eyes,
they brought him down to Gaza and bound him prisoner with double-bronze,
he was forced to grind (grain) in the prison-house.
But his hair began to grow again, as soon as it had been shaven off.

VII

The Philistines gathered together
to slaughter a great slaughter-offering to Dagon their god
for (a feast of) rejoicing.
They said:
Our god has given
into our hand
Shimshon our foe!
The people saw him
and praised their god, by their saying:
Our god has given
into our hand
(Shimshon) our foe,
destroyer of our land,
who multiplied our corpses!
It was, since their heart was in good humor,
that they said:
Call out Shimshon, that he may dance for us!
They had Shimshon called out of the prison-house,
and he danced before them.
Now they had him stand between the standing-pillars.
Shimshon said to the boy who held him by the hand:
Let me rest,
let me feel the pillars upon which the house is founded,
so that I may recline upon them.
Now the house was full of men and women,
all the Philistine tyrants were there,
and upon the roof about three thousand, man and woman,

who saw Shimshon dance.
Shimshon called to HIM,
he said:
My Lord, THOU,
now remember me,
now strengthen me,
just this one time,
O God,
I would take revenge, revenge at once for my two eyes
from the Philistines!
Shimshon embraced the two middle pillars
upon which the house was founded,
he leaned heavily upon them,
one at his right (hand), one at his left.
Shimshon said:
Let my soul die
with the Philistines!
He bowed with (all his) might,
the house fell
upon the tyrants,
upon all the people who were in it.
The dead whose death he caused in his death
were more than those whose death he had caused in his life.

His brothers and all the house of his father went down,
they lifted him, brought him up and buried him
between Tzor'a and Eshtaol, in the burying-place of his father Manoah.
He had judged Israel (for) twenty years.

At first glance, the overarching theme of the Samson cycle appears to be the breaking of the Nazirite vows.[12] Samson's behavior is the exact opposite of what is required of a Nazirite; the story recounts his systematic violation of every tenet of the vows. It has been pointed out[13] that the verb "bind," so prominent throughout the cycle, is used elsewhere in the Bible in intimate connection with the making of vows.[14] The narrative, then, directly links Samson's unacceptable behavior to his downfall. His crossing of taboo boundaries leads in the end to his being physically bound, and to death.

As important as is the theme of Naziriteship, however, emphasizing it means emphasizing Samson as an individual in total control of his own destiny. The text seems to be aiming at something quite different. Here, as so often in Biblical literature, the human hero recedes in favor of the divine one.[15] Samson's violations of the Nazirite vows, his thoughtless rages, and his lust for women—all of which are in normal circumstances highly inappropriate for a leader in ancient Israel—serve only as vehicles for the fulfillment of the divine historical plan. It is the classic Biblical pattern: human beings act upon their emotions, they play out their instinctual feelings into action; but in the final analysis, the action really takes place on a different plane. One is reminded particularly of scenes in the lives of the Patriarchs. God promises Abraham numerous descendants, but when the time comes to fulfill this pledge, it occurs, not by heaven-directed family

planning, but rather through the medium of fierce rivalry and jealousy between two sisters for the love of one man (Jacob). In the Joseph story, an entire people is saved for its future role in Biblical history, above and beyond economic and political reasons, because of the personal history of fraternal hatred in the central family. The Samson cycle continues the pattern, and spells it out unmistakably (14:4): "Now his father and his mother did not know that it was from HIM;/ that he was seeking an opportunity from the Philistines." The text has further linked the two levels of history by connecting a major theme of the Book of Judges, political anarchy, with Samson's personal life. The ending of the book (21:25), "In those days there was no king in Israel,/ every man did what was right in his own eyes," is echoed by Samson's emotional request of his parents (14:7; cf. v. 3), "Take *her* for me, for she is right in my eyes."

This tension between the divine and the human is maintained by the theme of secrecy, which runs through the entire narrative and basically holds it together. Everything is meant to lead up to the dramatic revelation of Samson's secret in the Delilah episode (one could also include the death scene as a second climax). On a continual basis, this major thematic thread is underscored by the use of three leading-words: *tell, know,* and *see.* Secrets are witheld from every character at some point—Manoah in episode I (he is, interestingly, never specifically told about the prohibition against his son shaving), both parents in II, Samson's wife and her countrymen in II, Delilah in VI, and the unsuspecting Philistines in VII. Dominating them all is the towering figure of the protagonist, ironically the most unaware character in the entire story. Significantly, the narrator rarely makes use of the verb *know* in relation to Samson himself, preferring instead to use *seeing* as his central metaphor. In episode I, seeing is believing; it involves the announcement of God's plan. Immediately in II, it becomes the vehicle for Samson's getting into trouble (but also of his doing away with Israel's enemies); it recurs with much the same meaning in V. Episode VI introduces the motif in a somewhat different light: it means finding out. In the great final scene of the cycle, seeing is mentioned only in connection with Samson's humiliation, yet the absence of sight, referring to the hero himself, is quite obvious.

By stressing the centrality of *seeing,* the narrator has made a highly loaded choice. The seer in the Bible is usually the man of God, one who is perfectly and often painfully aware of what God wants of him. This kind of seeing is crucial in understanding the traditions about both Abraham[16] and Moses; it stands at the very heart of the Balaam narrative (Numbers 22-24) as well.[17] But Samson is a totally different kind of seer, more voyeur than visionary. He rarely sees further than either his anger or his lust. In this vein, later Jewish interpreters felt that Samson's punishment was entirely appropriate: he who was led astray by his eyes, lost them.[18] And so Samson emerges from our text as a meaningful parody on *two* sacred Biblical types—Nazirite and prophet.

Beyond thematic considerations lie the remarkable structural elements of the Samson cycle. These have been dealt with rather widely by a number of skilled and sensitive interpreters;[19] nevertheless, we may re-examine the structure at this point. Such an analysis, albeit on a limited scale, will serve to illustrate the value of an oral-oriented reading of Biblical narratives.

Firstly, there is the matter of the internal cohesion of separate episodes of the story. Three examples may suffice. Already in part I the technique is established: not only are individual words utilized as structural pillars (e.g. *see* as a verb seven times, *guard* three times), but whole lines recur in formulaic emphasis (e.g. "for the boy shall be One Consecrated to God," "should your words come to pass," "Manoah and his wife saw it"). The backbone of the narrative is provided by three statements of the prohibitions surrounding the mother (threefold prohibitions, naturally), and by the three questions which Manoah asks (and to which he receives an equal number of ambiguous answers[20]).

Part II receives its structure from repetitions such as *take* (in marriage), *my people,* and *riddle a riddle* (each three times), *not telling* (four times), and the rhythmic *Timna,* accompanied by a preposition (five times). The major encounters of the story are usually preceded by Samson's *going down* to the Philistine town; this verb is punned in Hebrew with the one for *scraping,* conveniently producing a similar sound-pattern seven times.

Episode VI is built upon a rich texture of formulae, many of which occur three times and which tend toward a three-beat line in the original. The text is one of the most stylized in all of Biblical literature. Phrases such as, "whereby is your might so great," "whereby can you be bound, to humble you," "now the ambush

was sitting (for her) in the chamber," and "Philistines upon you, Shimshon!" create an aural tension which is relieved only by the inevitable outcome, the binding and blinding of the unaware, helpless hero.

As we have previously suggested, such tension is important for more than aesthetic reasons; it provides a mechanism for interpretation. In this case, a troubling question needs to be answered: How does Delilah know that Samson is at last telling the truth about himself? The narrator hints at the answer by shifting the wording of Samson's reply the third time it occurs. Instead of the familiar ("I become weak,/ I become like) one of humankind," one hears, "all of humankind," and that change is highlighted by the threefold statement which surrounds it: "he told her all his heart" (the pronouns change, but not the key word *all*). In the light of such internal motion in the text, it seems to me that to emend the text back to *one*, as many scholars have done, is to miss the point entirely.

The reader, then, who wishes to examine all the episodes of the Samson cycle will find that each has its own instinct identity. Yet the achievement of different traditions, or of separate strands within the tradition, pales in comparison with what the final editor of our material has accomplished. This can best be illustrated by means of the chart on the following page. It has been drawn up rather loosely, including both motifs and specific words (here italicized) which appear in the text. I have made no attempt to cite motifs in the order of their importance in the story, but have merely listed them in the sequence in which they appear. Despite the informality of the chart, however, an impressive architectonic emerges from it. In each of the first five episodes of the cycle, words, phrases or motifs are introduced (and reinforced) which foreshadow Samson's downfall in VI and VII. Seeing and enticing, knowing and telling, death and deliverance are all brought together in a dazzling display of narrative art. There is almost no element which does not reach its most pointed meaning in the final episodes; and even those which are not mentioned there by name (e.g. *spirit, deliver,* and Philistine rule) are clearly dealt with by implication. In the story of Samson's seduction and enslavement, and in the account of the blind hero who, mocked by his enemies, wreaks full vengeance upon them, can be found the high watermark of Biblical narrative and its oral antecedents. That this has been accomplished without the destruction of the individual integrity of the episodes is a tribute to the hand of a master.

The concept of foreshadowing leads to a final observation about the figure of Samson. Can we understand him only as a parody on Biblical leadership, or as the recast version of Herakles in Hebrew garb? It should also be clear by now that he bears little resemblance to what his later readers in the West have made of him; he is neither a symbol of despair turned into faith (Milton) nor a national liberator who sadly forgets himself in the bedroom (Saint-Saëns).

Samson may appear, rather, as a partial foreshadowing of another, more tragic Biblical figure: King Saul. Like Samson, Saul does not possess the definitive character traits necessary for successful leadership. He can only lay the groundwork for the eventual unification of the kingdom and the concomitant defeat of the Philistines (the same Philistines whom Samson likewise only "begins" to defeat). Both men, at least, are granted a heroic death, yet one is struck by their common portrayal—the portrayal of the spirit gone awry. No more moving or frightful description of this process exists than the one in I Samuel 18:10, where Saul's one-time possession of (or being-possessed-by) God's spirit is replaced by his torment at the hands of an "evil spirit," which also, in the Biblical scheme of things (I Samuel 16:14), comes from God. For Samson as well, the spirit is not a force that can be controlled to avert personal tragedy.

Yet for the Hebrew Bible, tragedy is not a personal affair; it is, rather, a communal one. Samson's era is not Job's, and his heroism, his blundering, and even his tragedy are swallowed up for Biblical man in the all-encompassing relationship of the Hebrew God with his treasured people. Samson in the end functions as the symbol of the straying, suffering, and, for the Biblical writer, triumphant folk from which he comes.

I 13:2-25 (Birth)	II 14:1-20 (Wedding)	III 15:1-8 (Revenge)	IV 15:9-20 (Jawbone)	V 16:1-3 (Gaza)	VI 16:4-22 (Delila)	VII 16:23-31 (Death)
1. woman	woman	woman		woman	woman	
2. SEE	SEE			SEE	SEE	SEE
3. no drinking	drinking				Wady of Vines	
4. hair/Nazirite					hair/Nazirite	
5. BEGIN					BEGIN	
6. DELIVER			DELIVER			
7. TELL	TELL				TELL	
8. DEATH			DEATH		DEATH	DEATH
9. 3 questions					3 questions (+1)	
10. GOAT-KID	GOAT-KID	GOAT-KID				
11. offer UP	went UP	went UP	led UP	brought UP	come UP	brought UP
12. KNOW	KNOW		KNOW		KNOW	
13. fire	FIRE	FIRE			FIRE	
14. SPIRIT	SPIRIT		SPIRIT			
15. FALL	FALL		FALL			FALL
16. TZOR'A						TZOR'A
	17. went DOWN	went DOWN	went DOWN		brought DOWN	
	18. FORESKINNED-ONES		FORESKINNED-ONES			
	19. Philistine rule		Philistine rule			
	20. 30	300	3,000			3,000
	21. 7				7	
	22. ENTICE				ENTICE	
	23. CALL		CALL		CALL	CALL
	24. don't love				don't love	
	25. PRESS HARD				PRESS HARD	
		26. (this) TIME			TIME	TIME
		27. REVENGE				REVENGE
			28. 1,000		1,000, 100	
			29. BIND		BIND	
				30. AMBUSH	AMBUSH	

Notes

1. Martin Buber, "Eine Uebersetzung der Bibel" (1926). In Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin, 1936), p. 307.

This quotation was used in 1971 at the beginning of an unpublished paper by David Roskies (to which the present writer contributed the translation) entitled, "The Samson Cycle: A Form-Study in the Biblical Epic." I have drawn many of my conclusions here from that work, and wish to express my gratitude to Professor Roskies for a stimuulating collaboration.

2. Axel Olrik, "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative," 1909. *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Engelwood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), pp. 131-141. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928, trans. Laurence Scott. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, vol. XXIV no. 4 (1958). Alfred Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, 1960).

3. For a thoughtful presentation of the current state of affairs in the field, see Robert C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Missoula, Montana, 1976).

4. One common ancient Hebrew name for the Bible was *miqra'*—the Calling-Out.

5. Notably in studies by Umberto Cassuto on Genesis and Exodus.

6. It was completed by Buber in 1961. For a more detailed analysis of the work, see my Afterword to *In the Beginning, Response* no. 14 (Summer 1972), pp. 143-157, and my dissertation, "Technical Aspects of the Translation of Genesis of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig" (Brandeis University, 1975). The translation is currently available as *Die Schrift* Koeln: Jakob Hegner Verlag) in four parts: *Die Fuenf Buecher der Weisung* (1954), *Buecher der Geschichte* (1956), *Buecher der Kuendung* (1958), and *Die Schriftwerke* (1962).

7. In *The Prophetic Faith* (New York, 1960, p. 5), Buber calls it "semi-rhythmic prose."

8. Cf. Buber, "Zu Einer Neuen Verdeutschung der Schrift," supplement to *Die Fuenf Buecher der Weisung*, pp. 15-19.

9. *Genesis* (Anchor Bible). Introduction, translation, and notes by E. A. Speiser (New York, 1964); pp. 85, 161.

10. E. Margaliyot, "The Parallels between the Samson Story and the Stories of the Aegean Sea Peoples" (Hebrew), *Bet Miqra'* 27 (1966), pp. 122-130. The parallels are of less interest and significance in the light of the major personality differences between the two heroes, as well as the primacy of God (rather than Samson himself) in the Judges account.

11. The passage setting forth the Nazirite laws is itself an excellent example of how Biblical laws are often cast in a spoken mold. It reads as follows (Numbers 6:1-8):

HE spoke to Moses, saying:
Speak to the Children of Israel, say to them:
When a man or a woman makes an extraordinary vow, the vow of
a Consecrated-One,
consecrated to HIM:
from wine and intoxicant he shall consecrate himself,
what is fermented of wine, what is fermented of intoxicant,
he shall not drink,
any juice of grapes, he shall not drink,
grapes, fresh or dried, he shall not eat:
all the days of his consecration,
from all that is made from the wine-vine, from pulp to skin,
he shall not eat.
All the days of his consecrated vow
a razor must not go upon his head;
until the days are fulfilled which he consecrates to HIM,
it shall be holy, he shall let the long hair of his head grow.
All the days which he consecrates to HIM,
near a dead body he shall not come,
by his father, by his mother, by his brother, by his sister,
he shall not (let himself) become tainted by them when they die,
for the consecration-sign of his God is upon his head:
all the days of his consecration
he is holy to HIM.

12. This is a central thesis of J. Blenkinsopp's piece, "Structure and Style in Judges 13-16," *Journal of Biblical Literature* vol. 82 (1963), pp. 65-75.

13. For this suggestion, as well as for an emphasis on the role of foreshadowing in the Samson cycle, I am indebted to George Savran's unpublished paper, "Narrative and Thematic Integration in the Samson Cycle," read before the American Academy of Religion, April 1974.

14. The passage, from Numbers 30:2-3, 4, 5, reads as follows:

Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of
Israel, saying:
This is the word which HE has spoken:
When a man vows a vow to HIM
or swears a sworn oath, to bind his soul by a bond,
he may not violate his word;
according to all that comes out of his mouth, he shall do.
And when a woman vows a vow to HIM.
and binds herself by a bond . . .
all her vows shall stand,
and all the bonds whereby she has bound herself shall stand.

15. Cf. J. A. Wharton, "The Secret of Yahweh: Story and Affirmation in Judges 13-16," *Interpretation* 27 (1963), pp. 48-66.

16. Cf. Buber, "Abraham the Seer," in *On the Bible* (New York, 1968), pp.

17. This is analyzed in Robert Alter's "Biblical Narrative," *Commentary*, vol. 61, no. 5 (May 1976), pp. 62-3. Alter also comments on the fire imagery of the Samson cycle as indicative of the hero's emotions. To this might be added the constant "up and down" motion within the story, which seems to me to be an apt description of his anger as well.

18. *Sotah* 9b (Babylonian Talmud).

19. A thorough literary treatment of the text has recently been done by Jo Cheryl Exum, "Literary Patterns in the Samson Saga: An Investigation of Rhetorical Style in Biblical Prose." (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1976).

20. Cf. Savran, *op. cit.*

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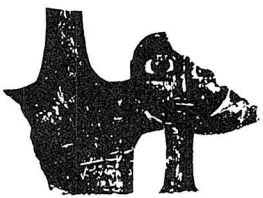

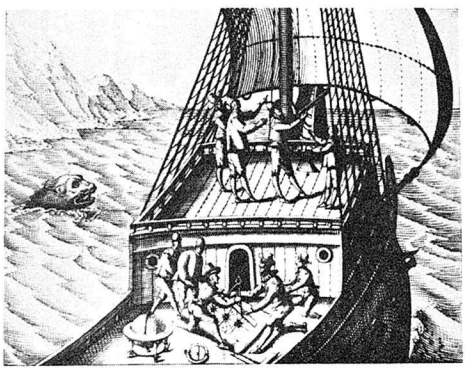

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