

# **SAMSON'S DEATH ACCOUNT AND THE ANCIENT THEOLOGY OF TERRITORIAL DOMINION**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The scene is dramatically depicted in Judges 16:23-30 and etched in popular imagination ever since; the blind Samson, humiliated and beaten by his Philistine captors, standing between the pillars of the Temple of Dagon and, after uttering a savage prayer for vengeance, pulling the pillars from their bases and collapsing the temple. As triumphant and glorious as this depiction may be, there is a powerful underlying theology that has been largely overlooked. Many Biblical interpreters have dismissed this account as so much popular folklore and have cast, largely unfounded, doubt on the historical and theological credibility of the scene of Samson between the pillars.

Our purpose herein will be to give an overview of the historical evidence which supports Samson's death account and, more importantly, to explore a powerful theological dimension of the account. Regarding the former aspect of our purpose we will argue that a close reading of the Hebrew and recent archaeological evidence combines to verify and validate the scene presented in Judges 16:23-30. Regarding the latter aspect, we will argue that the presentation of Samson's death in the temple of the Philistine god, Dagon, served as a polemic against the reigning polytheistic theology of divine authority and power, described as "territorial dominion". Therefore, we hypothesize that the account of Samson's death is not simply a piece of dramatic folklore, as some scholars would argue, but a reflection of an actual historical event and the conflicts which occurred between the new religion of YHWH and the established religions of the Canaanite region.

## SAMSON'S DEATH

Judges 16:3-30 is the narrative of Samson's downfall at the hands of Delilah, subsequent capture and blinding by the Philistines, imprisonment, and death in the temple of Dagon in Gaza. As we will discuss later, it must be noted that the Philistines were not an indigenous Canaanite people. The Philistines arrive in Canaan shortly after the well-documented invasion of the "sea peoples" in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century BC. It seems as though Samson stood against the Philistines, possibly about a century later, in a significant period of their ascendancy, possibly at the height of their power and domination of Israel.

### The Structure of the Temple

Before modern archaeological excavations scholars had little evidence of the construction of Philistine religion and temples, building their hypotheses on hints in the OT such as accounts found in Judges 16. R. Macalister, in the Schweich Lectures of 1911 typifies the scholarly argument: "The closing scene of Samson's career took place in a temple of Dagon at Gaza, which must have been a large structure, as different as possible from the native High Places of Palestine."<sup>1</sup>

Macalister, based on textual clues, argues that the Gaza temple was of the "megaron" type. This term refers to an architectural form consisting of an open porch or, more correctly, portico, which is a main hall whose roof is supported by columns. This would allow Samson to rest on the pillars, in the shade, at a respectful distance from the Philistine leaders. The shaded portico or porch, wherein the leaders sat to observe Samson, was "distyle" in that it was supported by two main pillars. Therefore, when Samson dislodged the pillars from their bases the portico, main hall, of the temple would collapse, followed by the rest of the structure being brought down.<sup>2</sup>

This idea was commonplace in scholarly circles for the subsequent decades. However, this could not be verified as there is a modern city on the site of Biblical Gaza and, therefore the ancient city has never been excavated. However, as pointed out by B. Wood, there is a site "just north of Jaffa" called Tell Qasile. This site has been excavated in the 1950's and 1970's. During the 1972 season archaeologists uncovered the first Philistine temple ever to be found. Dr. Wood describes the temple as follows:

"The temple is built of sun-dried mudbricks laid on stone foundations and plastered over with a light brown plaster. Its walls, whose average width is about four feet, have been preserved to a height of approximately two and one-half feet.

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<sup>1</sup> R.A.S. Macalister, *The Philistines: Their History and Civilization* (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), 90.

<sup>2</sup> Macalister, 123-124. Megaron refers to a great hall, usually of a Mycenaean palace. It was rectangular and fronted by an open 2-pillared porch or portico. It also had an open hearth, usually surrounded by 4 pillars, and vestibule. This type of building was used for poetry, feasts, worship, sacrifice and formal royal functions. Distyle refers to a portico with two pillars, usually between the antae or pillars at the entrance which were attached to the walls of the temple. Macalister also suggests that the wooden pillars were Mycenaean, or Minoan, which were made from inverted Cypress trees. The columns were wider at the top and tapered at the bottom, a result of inverting the cypress trunk so to prevent sprouting once in place. These were common in the Mediterranean area. He makes this suggestion based on the scholarly arguments regarding the origins of the Philistines; that they came from the Asia Minor area or were remnants of the sack of Knossos, therefore they would exhibit strong Grecian influences.

Consisting of two main parts, an antechamber and a main hall, the building measures 26 feet wide by 47 feet long. The antechamber is entered through a wide opening taking up the entire width of its north wall. Stepped plastered benches line the walls and the floor is of beaten earth.

An opening in the wall subdividing the building leads into the main hall, so that the visitor who entered the temple had to make a 90 degree turn in order to enter the main hall. This hall, with inside measurements of 18 ½ feet by 23 ½ feet, is a room whose roof was originally supported by two wooden pillars set on round, well-made stone bases, placed along the center axis. Here too, stepped plastered benches were built against the walls.

A narrow compartment, formed by a thin partition wall, is at the end of the main hall. A raised platform (*bama*, or altar) built against the partition projects into the hall. Built of mud-brick and plastered over, it is raised about three feet above the floor. On the north, the altar meets the plastered benches; while on the south, two plastered steps lead up to it. The lower step was built around the western pillar and covered its stone base.

The altar served as the focal point in the temple ritual. Its location, exactly opposite the center of the entrance-way, appears to have been carefully chosen. Both the altar and the entrance-way lie on a line north of the central axis, so that the visitor had an unobstructed view of the altar from the entrance to the main hall. At the same time, since the entrance to the building was placed at a right angle, people outside could not look into the main hall.”

Wood goes on to say that we can “imagine the Philistine lords sitting around the benches of the main hall of the temple of Dagon in Gaza, which must have been very similar to the one at Tell Qasile . . . And, just as the Bible describes, the Philistine temple at Tell Qasile had two pillars which supported the roof.” Pulling down these two pillars would cause “the entire building to collapse.”<sup>3</sup> The pillars would be within the reach of Samson, a huge man according to most scholars, as they were situated approximately six feet apart.

### **The Linguistic Argument**

The Hebrew text seems to agree with the depiction presented by modern archaeology. The first depiction of Samson’s final action is in Judges 16:26. Samson asks the servant who was leading him to place where he may touch the two pillars which support the temple so that he may “rest”, using the Hebrew term *שָׁעַן*. This term denotes a leaning on something, or someone, for support. Interestingly, it only occurs in the Niphal form of the verb. It also has connotations of trust.

Therefore, the depiction that is beginning to unfold is one of Samson standing behind the two pillars. This depiction would mean that, as suggested by the excavations, Samson would not obstruct the view of the altar and not be in plain view of the visitors and faithful attending the temple ritual. This strongly suggests that the people attending the temple, after Samson entertained them, would have to crowd into the main hall and antechamber to see the proceedings, probably some anticipated sacrifice to Dagon (16:27). The Philistines had viewed Samson’s capture and deliverance into their power as

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<sup>3</sup> B. G. Wood, “Samson and the House of Dagon,” *Bible and Spade* 3, no 2 (Spring 1974): 50-54.

a sign of the might of Dagon (16: 23, 24).<sup>4</sup> The onlookers would probably have pressed in further after Samson's prayer for vengeance (16:28), thus allowing even more people to enter the overcrowded temple area, assuming more entertainment was to be derived from Samson. The tired Samson, although blinded and outnumbered in the heart of Dagon's temple, is now entreating his God for the power to make a final stand. As we will discuss below, such a petition would be theologically absurd to the Philistines and they would be curious to see what the God of the overpowered Hebrews can accomplish.<sup>5</sup>

The text of Judges 16:29 reads;

“וילפת שמשון את שני עמידי התיך אשר הבית נכין עליהם ויסמך עליהם אחד בימינו ואחד בשמאלו, and Samson grasped the middle pillars which the house is built on and supported on; one with his right hand and one with his left.” In agreement with the text of Judges 16:26, the text of 16:29 depicts Samson as placing his hands behind the pillars, not in between them – presumably to push outward as many people imagine. The next part of the description follows with the phrase, ויט בכה, “bent mightily.” The term “bent” derives from the Hebrew, נטה, and is a common word with connotations of bending under force or effort. Also, it has a connotation of causing something to yield. The second part of the phrase, deriving from an obscure root, is understood as meaning a capacity to act, an ability to produce, or an expression of potency. Overall, it seems as though the basic intent is to denote physical power.<sup>6</sup>

It is noteworthy that derivatives of the term “might” occur eight times in the book of Judges, with seven occurrences in chapter 16 (vss 5, 6, 9, 15, 17, 30). While this term denotes the ability to do something, often the “emphasis is on the lack of strength or the insufficiency of human strength in comparison to God.” One must observe that the first five occurrences in chapter 16 deal with Delilah looking for the secret of Samson's strength in order to render Samson helpless, and the sixth occurs with the loss of his strength after she cut his hair. The final occurrence, between the pillars of the temple, comes immediately following Samson's petition to the Lord for power. Herein Samson does not rely upon his natural strength, but that which would come from YHWH. This usage of the term seems to parallel that which is found in the Psalter. In the Psalter the term occurs in “isolated individual laments with reference to dissipated human might that

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<sup>4</sup> The verses 23-25 are presented out of sequence in most translations of the Bible. The details seem to present a problem. However, we would suggest that the vss 23 and 24 should not be viewed as contradictory but complementary. Verse 23 seems to indicate the speech of the lords of the Philistines, praising the national god, Dagon. This type of detail is consistent with Verse 25 and 26 ff, and probably originated with the lad or young boy who was leading Samson. It is plausible to argue that he made good his escape, between the curiosity of the visitors and the panic which would ensue when the pillars began to move it is unlikely that anyone would notice the young boy making his way out of the temple. Verse 24 seems to be a summary of the proceedings and probably originated from the people who were outside of the temple, surviving the destruction, who could only relate cursory or general details of the activities.

<sup>5</sup> One has to remember that the Philistines, though weakened after their devastating battle with Egypt (c.1175 BC), was the dominant political and military force in the area of Canaan or Israel. They, at this point, are in an era of ascendancy and have already exerted control over Judah (Judges 15:11), the tribe which abutted Philistia after the Danite Migration which had already begun (Judges 13:25). Although they had made inroads, it is doubtful if the Philistines had ever conquered the entire nation of Israel. However, it can certainly be argued that they were first power in the region with the national and organizational resources to have been a threat to Israel's existence.

<sup>6</sup> J. Oswalt, “כהח” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:436-437.

occasions the pious to pray for God's assistance" (Pss 22:16,31; 31:11; 38:11; 71:9 and 102:24).<sup>7</sup>

The combination of these two terms indicates a powerful movement on the part of Samson. Such a surge of power would be consistent with the extreme, almost violent, effort needed to dislodge the pillars from their bases as they were held in place by the weight of the temple. To initiate the movement of the pillars would be the most difficult part and would require the greatest surge of power. Once the pillars were in motion Samson would have to continue dragging them off their bases. While this is still an act of tremendous power it is the easier part of the overall action.<sup>8</sup>

Once the pillars were dislodged from their bases the temple "fell" upon the Philistine lords and onlookers. The Hebrew term *nāpal*, נפל, is usually rendered as "fall." The use of this word was quite purposeful on the narrator's part. Linguistically, "besides the common physical action or occurrence [of falling], a violent or accidental circumstance is often indicated . . . damage, death, or destruction are often designated."<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly, Samson dislodging of the pillars was no accident. Therefore, this verb summarizes both the violent surge of power exhibited by Samson and its resultant destruction of the temple. Possibly, a better rendering of the verb would be "fall in/collapse". Once Samson dragged the pillars off their bases, the roof would collapse upon the Philistine lords and the crowds which had pressed into the temple hall. Once the main hall of the temple collapsed the entire structure, now rendered unstable from the loss of the supporting pillars and the sudden shifting of the crowds, would also collapse.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the Hebrew narrative is perfectly consistent with the findings at Tell Qasile.

## A THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF SAMSON'S DEATH

While the historical and narrative evidence depict a dramatic death scene in the temple of Dagon, the theology which forms its backdrop is equally dramatic. To understand the theological importance we must first understand the prayer which Samson uttered between the pillars.

Samson asks YHWH to remember and strengthen him one last time for vengeance, נקם, *nāqām*. Vengeance is the core of the prayer. According to E. Smick, "study of the use of this root reveals that there are comparatively few cases where man is considered a proper source of vengeance. Often man is a secondary cause while God is

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<sup>7</sup> A. van der Woude, "power" *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 2: 610-611. This term is perfectly appropriate for the setting of Samson's death between the pillars. In Judges 16:25, we see that Samson was made to entertain the Philistines. Since Samson was considered a national enemy (v. 23) we can assume that this was a rigorous ordeal for him. Judges 16:26 may suggest this arduous ordeal as well, as we stated, he asked to placed between the pillars to "rest" against them. At this point, scholars are debating the issue of exactly to what activities Judges 16:25 refers. Regardless of the actual treatment, Samson was undoubtedly tired and drained from the ordeal and had to rely on YHWH for the power to make this final stand.

<sup>8</sup> John Roskoski, "Between the Pillars: Revisiting 'Sampson and the House of Dagon,'" *Bible and Spade* 18 #1 (Winter 2005): 17.

<sup>9</sup> M. Fisher, "נפל" *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2: 587.

<sup>10</sup> The text reads that onlookers were on the actual roof of the temple, or the shaded portico in which Samson was standing. The number of onlookers mentioned is highly questionable, but if a large number of temple visitors were on the roof it would add to the instability of the temple, facilitating the collapse. Also, the added weight on the supporting pillars would cause an increase in the amount of force exerted by Samson to dislodge the pillars.

the source. This is normally the case where the Israelites avenge themselves on their enemies. . . Most of the uses of *nāqām* involve God as the source of vengeance.”<sup>11</sup>

G. Sauer states that “the concept of vengeance refers to the typical private penalty that properly pertains to persons located outside one’s own jurisdiction and authority.” Also, Sauer points out that “successful and desired human vengeance always requires divine authorization or permission.”<sup>12</sup> W. Pitard points out that one of the major aspects of vengeance is “the rendering of a just punishment upon a wrongdoer or the recompense given to the victim of the wrongdoing.” In Samson’s case, the gouging out of his eyes (16: 21) would be the wrongful act which would deserve recompense. In the Hebrew Scripture the concept of vengeance is often presented in a positive light, according to Pitard, “as a type of action appropriate (with certain limitations) to humans and particularly to God.”<sup>13</sup> In most occurrences, “vengeance” is viewed as “the rectification of some misdeed.” Many times *nqm* “refers to the just punishment meted out to a wrongdoer or to the damages or recompense awarded to the victim of the crime. This is not to be seen as malicious or vindictive retaliation by the wronged person, but rather as a just recompense for a crime.” In Samson’s prayer he is appealing to Divine vengeance for what he feels was an unjust action within his exchange of aggressions with the Philistines, the gouging out of his eyes. Human vengeance may or may not be seen as appropriate. However, Divine vengeance is always presented as appropriate. According to Pitard, Divine vengeance is often “requested by a petitioner when [he] is afraid that justice may not be done on a human level. The exact form of the divine vengeance upon the wicked is usually left quite vague.”<sup>14</sup> Divine vengeance is often invoked upon “external enemies” who oppress Israel and should be understood as an appeal for justice.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, while Samson’s prayer reflects the common and, sometimes harsh, theology of vengeance in Israel the implications regarding the location – the temple of Dagon- is of theological significance.

### **Canaanite Theology of Divine Authority**

Although Samson died in a Philistine temple, the influence of Canaanite culture, or syncretism, on the Philistines can not be overlooked. Several general observations must be made regarding the Canaanite religions. Generally, there existed a strong association between place, deity, and royalty. Deities were associated with places, such as cities and, eventually, nations. The King, or city ruler, was seen as the official of the

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<sup>11</sup>E. Smick, “נקם” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2: 598.

<sup>12</sup>G. Sauer, “to avenge” *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 2: 768.

<sup>13</sup>One could make the alternative argument that Samson’s escalating series of actions with the Philistines was an example of the Greek concept of “*menis*” or wrath, wherein the final event of the series is out of proportion to the initial act of the series. In this case, the original act was the Philistines cheating on the wager at Samson’s wedding (Judges 14). Cf. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 685-686.

<sup>14</sup>Therefore we can see Samson’s prayer to YHWH as an appeal to the only agent powerful enough to exact any vengeance on the Philistines. The Israelites were not able to exact any vengeance as they were dominated by the politically and militarily superior Philistines.

Significantly, Samson’s prayer for vengeance is by no means vague. He is praying for his invincible strength to make one last stand against his enemies. He is making not a general plea for vengeance, but he is asking for YHWH to grant vengeance now- in the heart of an enemy temple- and to be the instrument of this Divine vengeance.

<sup>15</sup>W. Pitard, “Vengeance”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday: NY, 1992), vi:786-787.

deity's cult. Temples functioned, quite literally, as the house of the deity. One of the more common religious tenets in the Ancient Near East was that the gods were at their most powerful in their local area or sanctuaries.<sup>16</sup>

M. Grant explains that "in polytheistic Canaan, as in many other countries, each locality and settlement and craft and aspect had its own deities. They included minor gods, to whom ordinary men and women liked to attach themselves, as protectors of their interests. But there were also high gods, with universal aspects, although their omnipotence and domination over humankind seemed diminished by the rival existence of their fellow divinities."<sup>17</sup> Grant also describes the places of worship.

"Characteristic Canaanite places of worship were what the Bible, speaking of them with horror, has accustomed us to describe as 'high places' (*bamoth*), not necessarily hill-tops- they could even be in a valley – but artificial or natural mounds or knolls or raised platforms standing above the levels of their surroundings."<sup>18</sup>

These "high places" were part of the "normative Canaanite worship during the Judges and Monarchy periods, according to R. Wolfe.<sup>19</sup> He continues, "the popular high places were devoted principally to local deities. . . this religion at the high places, throughout the Judges-Kings period, was for the most part a surviving stone-age worship of nature gods."<sup>20</sup> Overall, according to F.F. Hvidberg, it is well known that in Canaanite worship certain places were seen to have been where holy power was especially concentrated.<sup>21</sup>

F. Greenspahn points to a custom, preserved on a Babylonian tablet, which has the king washing the mouth of a statue of a deity. Once this ritual was performed it was believed that the deity took up residence in the dwelling. Greenspahn claims that "this ideology explains why ancient writers were so upset when these images were removed from their sanctuaries and saw their restoration as tantamount to the return of the gods they represent."<sup>22</sup>

Identification of local gods could also be made with the people or worshippers of the deities. L. Boadt explains that "it was very common in the ancient world to identify the local gods and goddesses of a people with the new gods of a conqueror or victor in war. People simply transferred their loyalty and public allegiance to a new god but

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<sup>16</sup> The story of Naaman's leprosy, 2 Kings 5:1-19, illustrates the idea of a ruler being the official of the deity's cult and, moreover, it shows how the powers of deities were linked to the land in which they were worshipped.

<sup>17</sup> M. Grant, *The History of Ancient Israel* (NY: Scribner's, 1984), 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. We would suggest the possibility that the raised altar in the excavated Philistine temple, Tell Qasile, possibly originated as a Canaanite "high place". This would lead to the likelihood that the Philistines adopted a Canaanite temple or built their own around the existing the High Place. We would suggest that the latter theory is more plausible due to the similarities in structure, as surmised by Macalister, to Grecian buildings.

<sup>19</sup> R. Wolfe, *The Twelve Religions of the Bible* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 120.

<sup>20</sup> Wolfe, 140.

<sup>21</sup> F.F. Hvidberg, *Weeping and Laughing in the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 80.

<sup>22</sup> F. Greenspahn, "Syncretism and Idolatry in the Bible", *Vetus Testamentum* 54, no 4 (2004): 483. This linking between the statue and the god itself seems to be the background for the episode of the Ark in the temple of Dagon (1 Samuel 5:1-5). It is important to note that the Philistine god is always referred to by name and never referred to as a statue or idol, even when alluding to his head and hands.

understood that really no change had taken place.”<sup>23</sup> Hvidberg comments that “in general the gods of the conquered country mean an increase in power to the gods of the invading people.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, Hvidberg is arguing, the religion of the conquering people absorbed aspects of the indigenous religion, thus expanding the attributes ascribed to the gods. Overall, as accepted by most scholars, some form of fusion or syncretism is inevitable between the religion of the conqueror and the religion of the conquered people.

### **The Authority of the God of Israel**

Although associated with the people of Israel, YHWH is presented in the Bible as different from the polytheistic gods of the Canaanite region. R.K. Harrison, following Albright, argues that the God of the Patriarchs was not restricted to one particular locality and the God was not associated with a “specific locality”. This is in contrast with the general Mesopotamian background of the Patriarchs.<sup>25</sup> G. Fohrer sees the nucleus of the Patriarchal narratives as follows:

“[They are] independent narratives embodying the territorial claims and describing the territorial occupation of several Israelite groups with charismatic founders of tribes and based on promises made by the tribal God[s].”<sup>26</sup>

He continues that, like the patriarchal narratives, the Moses traditions are about territorial claims and occupation with a religious basis. This basis is the promise of the deity, YHWH. Fohrer argues that “the connection is made clear from the very outset by the relationship between the call of Moses . . . [and] by the goal given the Exodus through the promise of territory.”<sup>27</sup> The Moses/Conquest/Settlement traditions link “together faith in God and the account of His dealings with men and nations in the past, present and future.”<sup>28</sup> With the Judahite Monarchy, Fohrer sees an association between YHWH and a location. Focusing on the book of Chronicles he states that the Chronicler’s purpose was “to show that, in contrast to the godless Northern Kingdom, the Kingdom of Judah, with the Davidic Dynasty and the Jerusalem Temple, is the true Israel and the representative of God’s dominion, realized in the Kingdom of David.”<sup>29</sup>

J. Goldstein supports this argument which depicts YHWH as being connected to the nation of Israel. He states that “some ancient civilizations, notably the Babylonian and the Israelite, held fast to the belief that their particular God (or gods) was stronger than all other heavenly powers and gods combined, supremely able to protect their well-being and success as a nation.”<sup>30</sup> In his work, *Peoples of an Almighty God*, Goldstein defines such a civilization as “one which believes that a god stronger than all other powers combined is ultimately committed to be their protector, though temporarily the

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<sup>23</sup> L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1984), 215. An example of this might be the transformation undergone by the Greek pantheon when Rome took over the empire. Of course, Boadt’s argument works only in polytheistic religions. Such transferring of allegiances would not be sanctioned by the Yahwist cult. This would be a source of considerable conflict when the Philistines, who dominated the region of Canaan but adopted many Canaanite religious features, might try to force their religion on the Israelites or adopt Israelite, or Yahwist, religious practices and attributes.

<sup>24</sup> Hvidberg, 87.

<sup>25</sup> Harrison, 397.

<sup>26</sup> G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. D. Green (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 124.

<sup>27</sup> Fohrer, 125.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>30</sup> J. Goldstein, *Peoples of an Almighty God* (NY: Doubleday, 2002), abstract on dust jacket.

people may suffer adversity.”<sup>31</sup> The Israelites, as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, saw their God as a “special Divine protector,” as stronger than all other cosmic or divine powers combined. This type of belief is a form of monolatry, as monotheism is not required.<sup>32</sup>

R.A. Rosenberg states that devotees of Marduk and YHWH “taught that while their respective gods were supreme, and incorporated within their persons all of the other divinities, this supremacy and the type of veneration that it called forth applied only to the particular territorial domain of the deity.”<sup>33</sup> He continues to argue that in early periods of Israelite history, the refusal of YHWH to allow homage to other gods was based on his mastery of his “territory” and He was jealous of His prerogatives. Only under the neo-Assyrian universalistic theologies was YHWH seen as having His territory expanded to the whole world, but the concept of “jealousy” was retained.<sup>34</sup>

R. Wolfe makes the following explanation.

“Although accompanied by these subsidiaries, YHWH was the chief deity upon whom all Israelite religion eventually focused. Transported to the land of Canaan in the Ark of the Covenant, He soon came to be thought of as the God of Israel and the God of Palestine. The reforming Judges were considered appointed by YHWH. Since the ensuing Monarchy was construed as a Theocracy under YHWH’s guidance and inspiration, the king was revered as ‘YHWH’s anointed’.”<sup>35</sup>

Under Solomon the territorial focus became the Jerusalem Temple. Under the auspices of Solomon’s dedication of the Temple, “Jerusalem now became the center for all [Yahwist] worship.” From Solomon’s prayer “came the doctrine of praying toward God’s holy Temple with respect to what was done there . . . even any foreigner who wished to worship YHWH would have his prayer answered if he prayed toward YHWH in His Temple in Jerusalem.”<sup>36</sup>

### **YHWH and the Philistine god, Dagon**

The dramatic scene between the pillars of the temple of Dagon in which Samson invokes Divine vengeance can be understood as a territorial power struggle between YHWH and Dagon. However, it must be observed that Dagon was not a god brought to Canaan by the Philistines. J. Day points out that according to Ugaritic texts Dagon was depicted as the father of Baal. There seems to have been a strong cult of Dagon in the Canaanite region as Biblical records show that the name Beth-Dagon occurs twice in the OT; Joshua 15:41 and 19:27. Day suggests that Dagon was adopted by the Philistines when they settled on the coast of Canaan. Based on the account of Samson’s death at what appears to have been a sacrifice to Dagon in the temple in Gaza (Judges 16:23), the temple at Ashdod (1 Samuel 5:1-2), and the temple at Beth-Shan (1 Samuel 31:10,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 4. Monolatry is the recognition of the existence of many gods, but with the consistent worship of only one deity. This deity is alone worthy of worship. However, henotheism is the worship of one god, but seeing other gods as possibly worthy of praise. According to Judges 2:10-19, Israel often fell into henotheism, worshipping the local Canaanite gods.

<sup>33</sup> R.A. Rosenberg, “Yahweh Becomes King,” *Journal of Biblical Studies* 85, no 3 (1966): 301.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfe, 142.

<sup>36</sup> J. Kelso, *Archaeology and the Ancient Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 133-134.

1 Chronicles 10:10) Day argues that Dagon is portrayed as a chief god among the Philistines.<sup>37</sup> The term “baal” seems to have functioned as an epithet, meaning “lord” or “master”, and the local baals were manifestations of the cosmic deity, Hadad or Baal. This accounts for the OT recording many place-names with the term “baal” and that these manifestations were connected with particular geographical locations.<sup>38</sup>

E. Hindson argues for the significance of the Semitic names of the Philistines’ gods.

“Since their deities (Dagon, Ashtoreth, and Baal-zebul) have Semitic names it is most obvious that the Philistines assumed much of the Canaanite religious concepts when they arrived in Palestine, [however] they probably brought a strong religious heritage with them and accommodated some of the Semitic names, terminology and practices, so as to be acceptable with the Canaanite peoples.”<sup>39</sup>

This concern for proper worship seems to be embedded in the Philistines’ respect for the territorial authority of the Canaanite gods and their own religious beliefs. As Hindson states, the Philistines were “deeply imbued with superstition, for they carried their idols with them on their battle campaigns (2 Samuel 5:21). These small, portable images were carried as good luck amulets [as] these warrior-minded peoples were very concerned about the gods’ favor upon them in battle.”<sup>40</sup>

Part of the religious heritage which the Philistines brought with them was the idea of cosmic authority of deities. According to Hindson, the Philistines recognized the “extra-territorial” jurisdiction of their deities and others also.

“For example, they feared the power of YHWH in the incident involving the Ark at Ashdod and sent presents to him as the Ark was returned to the Israelites. This action indicates that the polytheistic Philistines believed YHWH to be real and to have power even in their territory, whereas the Canaanites believed that a god had power only within his own confined locale.”<sup>41</sup>

In the god, Dagon, we see this blending, or syncretism, between Canaanite and Philistines religions clearly. Originally, Dagon was a Canaanite deity, to be identified with the Akkadian Dagan. According to Montalbano, this deity was well known as early as the Old Akkadian Period (2360-2180 BC) and was associated with the upper Euphrates region.<sup>42</sup> According to Day, the earliest known sources connect Dagon with being a

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<sup>37</sup> J. Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000), 85-86. It might be suggested that the impaling of Saul’s body on the Beth-Shan temple might indicate the importance of this temple, possibly due to the Gaza temple being destroyed by Samson, or a display of power of Dagon over the representative of the cult of YHWH, King Saul, if not YHWH Himself.

<sup>38</sup> Day, 68-69. “Baal” or “lord” seems to have been the title of this deity, who was often simply referred to as Baal. In other words, Hadad and Baal are often considered one and the same. Therefore, Dagon should be recognized as the father of Hadad as well, even though Dagon is more frequently given the paternal connection with “Baal.”

<sup>39</sup> E. Hindson, *The Philistines and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 25.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 31. It seems likely that this belief was the background for their bribing Delilah to find the secret of Samson’s strength. The Philistines seemed to have thought that it was some sort of charm or amulet, which could be stolen, which gave Samson his invincible power.

<sup>41</sup> Hindson, 32. The incident of the Ark is found in 1 Samuel 5-6.

<sup>42</sup> F.J. Montalbano, “Canaanite Dagon: Origin, Nature,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 13, no 4 (1951):393. He makes this association because the Akkadian presents the Canaanite “o” as an original “a” or “u”. Therefore, Dagon was the original name of this deity.

storm god, therefore a fertility god. Eventually, the name became associated with “corn” or “grain”. This is a result of the storm and fertility background, as the storm is from “whence the corn would derive.” We find this association with corn or grain in the Ugaritic Keret epic. The Hebrew, *dāgān*, “a word reflecting the original pronunciation of the divine name as Dagon”, means “corn” or “grain.”<sup>43</sup> Montalbano states that “among the Canaanites, Dagon was worshipped as a grain god and as such was well-suited to the conditions of the land of Canaan, and to the mentality of its inhabitants, who rendered homage to the soil and its productive forces.”<sup>44</sup>

With the Philistines’ respect for the territorial dominion of the gods, they would readily adopt the cult of Dagon. Day claims that “the Philistine plain where Dagon was especially worshipped in Palestine was a particularly corn-rich area.” However, “the meaning ‘grain’ or ‘corn’ was derivative from the name of the god rather than vice versa.”<sup>45</sup> The importance of grain to the Philistines can be seen in Samson’s action of burning the crops of the Philistines (Judges 15:5). This incident, in the eyes of the Philistines, changed Samson’s status from a brawling troublemaker to a national enemy and an enemy of Dagon.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, given the importance of grain to the Philistines and their idea of cosmic authority of deities, it is understandable that Dagon was seen as the head of the Philistine pantheon and had universal aspects attributed to him.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the struggle portrayed in the account of Samson’s death was between Dagon, an established idol in the region and universalized by the Philistines, and YHWH, the God of the Israelites who promised this land to His people.

### **THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SAMSON’S DEATH**

Samson’s death, along with the destruction of the temple and its visitors, has a theological significance and trajectory which moves beyond the collapsed walls in Gaza. On a basic, popular, level his dramatic death scene gave renewed faith and hope to the Israelites, whose national spirit was waning under the yoke of Philistine oppression. The Philistines were enjoying an ascendancy of power and the Israelites had resigned themselves to their domination (Judges 15: 11). Samson’s triumphant final stand against the Philistines showed the Israelites that even in the direst of circumstances and against overwhelming forces YHWH will still remember and deliver His people.

Historically, Samson’s death, as does his life and exploits against the Philistines, point to the Davidic Kingship. Samson was to “begin the deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (Judges 13:5). This type of commission was unique among the Judges, as the other major, or delivering, Judges brought about complete victories or deliverance from Israel’s oppressors.<sup>48</sup> Samson’s work of deliverance was completed

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<sup>43</sup> Day, 87.

<sup>44</sup> Montalbano, 397.

<sup>45</sup> Day 87-88.

<sup>46</sup> This status is probably the reason for the terminology of the victory songs in Judges 16:23 and 24, wherein the delivering of Samson is attributed to Dagon and Samson is referred to as the ravager of the land.

<sup>47</sup> Macalister, 99.

<sup>48</sup> One must note that the Philistines were a threat to the existence of Israel. They introduced iron weaponry to the area and were politically and militarily superior to the Israelites. The conquering peoples which were defeated by the other Judges, though powerful, did not pose such a danger to the Israelites.

when Philistine power was broken by David (2 Samuel 5). Therefore the threatening presence of the Philistines provided the historical link between Samson and David.

Judges 14-15 narrates the escalating series of hostile exchanges which took place between Samson and the Philistines. Within these chapters, Samson is presented as a Charismatic Leader, wherein we read that the YHWH Spirit rushed mightily upon Samson.<sup>49</sup> This foreshadows the charismatic kingship of Saul and David. By virtue of the Spirit these men rose to leadership positions in Israel. Moreover, the Hebrew construction of the phrase, “and rushed mightily” (וַתִּצְלַח) is unique to the Samson, Saul, and David traditions. Therefore, Samson’s charisma provides a significant political and theological link to the Kingship of Israel.

Samson’s death, in which the reigning Philistine lords perish, fulfills his mission and would go far in weakening the Philistine political and military organization. Samson’s final act slowed, or halted the Philistine ascendancy. This allowed the victories of Samuel (1 Samuel 7) and Saul (1 Samuel 14) over the Philistines. Moreover, the victorious death of Samson allowed for the significant achievements of the Saulide kingship. According to J.L. McKenzie, Saul “created an Israel solid enough to survive in E Palestine even after a shattering defeat (1 Samuel 31). He built up an armed force with some pride and experience of success. It was due to Saul more than to any one else that there was an Israel whose elders could invite David to be their king (2 S 5:1); the monarchy of David arose from the monarchy of Saul.”<sup>50</sup> If the Philistines were allowed to keep gathering power it is difficult to imagine that Saul would have been able to achieve the benchmarks of which McKenzie writes. Therefore, Samson’s death built the foundation for the Monarchy of Israel.

Theologically, Samson’s final stand against the Philistines and death in the temple of Dagon went far in making the name of YHWH known among the nations. Samson’s death also portrayed the universal power of YHWH the God of Israel. Dagon was the head of the Philistine pantheon, the father of Baal and, therefore, the local manifestations of Baal. Dagon was seen as a universal god, presumably, as a result of the religious heritage brought by the Philistines. As Macalister argues, as substantiated by archaeology, the Gaza temple was very different from the “high places” which characterized Canaanite worship. The festival was probably a fixed occasion on the religious calendar and not only a celebration of Samson’s capture. If it was just a celebratory event there would not have been any duration of time elapsing in which Samson’s hair could have noticeably grown. Macalister points out that this was a sacrifice to Dagon, as we read in Judges 16:23, and suggests that Samson was to be a human sacrifice.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps this was a remnant of Dagon originally being worshipped as a fertility god. Therefore, this was a struggle between universal and almighty deities and

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<sup>49</sup> A Charismatic Leader is generally defined as a person who experiences the Spirit of the Lord coming upon him. Cf Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:6, 19; 15:14. Among the Judges it was a transitory force which impelled one to rise up and lead Israel against her enemies. Saul’s charisma, though not quite the same with the term “Spirit of God”, seems to have been temporary as well, 1 Samuel 10:6, 10,11:6, with its departure narrated in 16:14. However, David’s charisma was permanent, 1 Samuel 16:13.

<sup>50</sup> J.L. McKenzie, “Saul,” *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1966), 777.

<sup>51</sup> Macalister, 90-91.

YHWH, through the power of Samson, would display his universal authority and power by destroying the temple of Dagon.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, Samson's death between the pillars of the temple shatters the concept of "territorial dominion." Territorial dominion can best be described as the authority and power of a deity being connected to and limited to the area in which it is worshipped. While the Philistines attributed universal aspects to Dagon, the Canaanites still worshipped the local manifestations of Baal and believed that the power of these local baals were concentrated in the places of worship. According to this concept, the power of Dagon should have been at its height between the pillars of the temple and before the altar of Dagon; precisely the location of the Divine vengeance worked through the blind Samson. To phrase it another way: YHWH promised land to his people, the Israelites; YHWH has now defeated, through Samson's self-sacrifice, the chief god of the conquering Philistines pantheon; YHWH has revealed His power in the temple of Philistine god in Gaza of Philistia, showing that His power transcends national boundaries.

The established transcending power of YHWH weakened the influence of the Canaanite "high places". Injunctions were made against these high places (Numbers 33:52). Actions were taken against the altars and places of worship (Judges 6:25-32). However, as is generally agreed upon by scholars, the early Israelites would adopt Canaanite high places for their own worship, replacing the local Baal with YHWH, thus preserving the pagan rites. Samson's destruction of the Gaza temple illustrated that the power of YHWH was not concentrated only at these adopted high places. The power of YHWH was not restricted or limited neither to an area of land nor only to people who worshipped Him. Therefore, this action helped to usher in the movement away from such pagan worship toward a more centralized faith, attributing to YHWH universal authority. This movement culminated in the Davidic-Solomonic period when Jerusalem, and the Temple, was established as the political and religious center of Israel and the Yahwist religion.<sup>53</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The account of Samson's death in Judges 16 should not be regarded as the stuff of folk tales or legend. Rather the narrative of his death should be seen as a reflection of actual historical and theological circumstances which existed in pre-Monarchic Israel. Historical disciplines, such as archaeology and linguistics, have gone far in supporting the details found in the Biblical account. While the size of the temple which Samson collapsed has grown over the centuries in popular imagination, there is little reason to doubt that the account in Judges is credible and reflects an actual historical event.

The prayer uttered by Samson between the pillars reflects the perspective of the people of the Ancient Near in this time period. The prayer has a main theme of a singular act of vengeance, which Samson presents to YHWH as a just recompense for the gouging out of his two eyes. The phrasing of the prayer reflects urgency; Samson uses the three

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<sup>52</sup> This action was the prelude to the incident of the Ark in the Ashdod temple, wherein the power of YHWH collided with the Dagon idol directly (1 Samuel 5).

<sup>53</sup> As the Kingship weakened and became more corrupt we see a regression to the earlier forms of pagan worship, typified in the episode in which Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18).

appellations of the God of Israel- YHWH (the Divine Name), *Adonai* (Lord), and *Elohim* (God). He also prays for YHWH to remember and strengthen him “now”. The urgency is most likely the result of his knowledge that his sacrifice to Dagon was moments away. He prays to YHWH for Divine vengeance, and to be the instrument of this vengeance, as he knows that Israel is not powerful to exact recompense from the Philistines. Therefore, this was an elemental, if not savage, prayer for justice which was perfectly consistent with the prevailing attitudes of the historical period.

While the call for just vengeance reflects the historical perspective of the contemporary peoples, it also points to the theological significance of his action. Samson stood alone, with only his faith YHWH, between the pillars of Dagon. Gone was the naziritic consecration.<sup>54</sup> There is no hint of any onrush of the YHWH Spirit. Yet, he calls upon his God to enter the heart of an enemy temple where, by the theologies of the Canaanite region, the pagan deity should be at its most powerful and exact this singular vengeance. The temple being brought to ruin eclipses the universal attributes of Dagon and shatters the concept of territorial dominion. It demonstrates that YHWH is a God who associates Himself with people of faith and whose power is not linked or limited to geographic areas. Therefore, with the collapse of the temple of Dagon YHWH begins to establish Himself as an almighty God with a universal domain.

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<sup>54</sup> Even though the text mentions that his hair had begun to grow back (16:22), it is unclear if the hair which grew back reinstated his consecration. This reference in the text seems to be a literary device, used by the storyteller to foreshadow the triumph which will come. Also, it seems to be a remnant of the idea, prevalent in the Ancient Near East, that a man’s vigor, vitality, and power were commensurate with the length of his hair.

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