

# SAMSON AND THE GAZITE HARLOT: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JUDGES 16:1-3

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## INTRODUCTION

Judges 16:1-3, which recounts Samson's visit to a harlot that ended with him pulling up the gates of Gaza and walking off with them, is a unique account in the Samson narratives, Judges 13-16. It is a short piece of narration, unlike the extended accounts of escalating hostilities which characterize the bulk of the narratives. Perhaps, the aspect that truly sets it apart from the rest of the Samson narratives is the complete lack of theological elements; there is no mention of any naziritic consecration, rush of the YHWH Spirit, or moment of faith. While one could argue that these elements are "understood," the significance of the conspicuous absence of these elements must be considered.

The importance of this small piece of narration is often overlooked or understated by Biblical interpreters. Many scholars, too numerous to mention, dismiss this story as simply a piece of Israelite folk lore that depicts Samson's amorous and physical prowess. It allegedly typifies a brutal and savage humor which is found in the Samson narratives.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars see this account as indicative of the independent nature of the stories in the narratives. This argument is typified by J.L. McKenzie who argues that all of the stories in the Samson narratives are "grouped loosely; each of them no doubt was originally independent".<sup>2</sup> This study opposes such a view and will propose that, while each exploit can be read as an adventure in itself, there are undeniable

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. H. Gunkel, "Simson," *Reden und Aufsätze* Gottingen: University Press 1913; 43-45, wherein he states that entire tone of the narratives is crude and brutal. Wild ethics and a savage humor mark the stories. This account of Samson's postcoital strength is "outrageously funny".

<sup>2</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 767.

overarching themes tying the individual exploits together and this short account is a key aspect in this continuity.

While this study will assert the unique nature of the account of the Gazite harlot, it will also argue that there is a greater significance to this story than relegating it to a simple story of Samson's prowess. It will be argued that this is a coherent and purposeful literary unit. The Gazite harlot is not simply background element for Samson's exploits but she has a theological importance to the overall story. Lastly, it will be argued that the narration of Samson carrying off the gates of the city is historically credible, given the indications of the gate structure and the actual size and strength of Samson. Theologically, it provides powerful theological insights to Samson and YHWH.

## **THE SETTING: GAZA**

The city of Gaza had a long history before the Philistine arrival and Samson's famous visit. The origin and foundation of Gaza is debated among scholars. However, it seems like that its growth was based on its proximity to the great caravan route between Syria and Egypt. It was known as a rest stop on the edge of the desert and a great trading center.<sup>3</sup> According to H. Katzenstein, the name "Gaza" appears for the first in the annals of Thutmose III (1502-1448 BC), as property of the Egyptian crown. The town became the capital of the Egyptian province "Canaan." Katzenstein argues that Egypt's presence in Canaan, with Gaza as a main city for approximately 400 years (1550-1150 BC).<sup>4</sup> However, under Amenhotep II Egyptian control had begun to erode in the region and was eventually confined to the coastal plains and lowlands. This situation facilitated the Israelites capturing much of the hill country during the Conquest under Joshua.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Ross, "Gaza", *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 375.

<sup>4</sup> H. Katzenstein, "Gaza (Prehellenic)", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 2:912-915.

Toward the end of this period, the Ancient Near East saw the invasion of the “Sea Peoples”. Among these peoples were the Philistines who, after a devastating battle with Egypt, settled on the southwest coast of Canaan in ca. 1177 BC.<sup>5</sup> The battle had weakened Egypt to such a degree that they could not prevent the Philistines from entering this vassal land. The Philistines had advanced military and political organization and established a confederation of five cities, known as the Pentapolis. Katzenstein argues that “since Gaza had once been the capital, it became the leading power among” the Pentapolis.<sup>6</sup>

By the time of Samson, the town was well fortified, “with a gate and a watchtower next to it, and it had a prison”. Katzanstein argues that the “most important building must have been the temple of Dagon”. Furthermore, Katzenstein suggests the possibility that this temple was built upon the temple of Amon, erected by Rameses III.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, overall, it seems that Gaza was a cosmopolitan city. This being the case, there is little doubt that harlots were common in Gaza.

### **STRUCTURE OF 16:1-3**

Although short, Judges 16:1-3 exhibits a very tight and purposeful construction. J. Kim has suggested a structural schematic which illustrates the composition of this account:

The first verse is an introduction setting the scene.

- A: The men of Gaza were told, “Samson has *come* here”
- B: They lay in wait for him at the **city gate**
- C: They kept quiet all night, saying
- D: “UNTIL morning, then we will kill him”
- D’: “UNTIL midnight Samson lay
- C’: He arose at midnight

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<sup>5</sup> B.G Wood, “Recent Discoveries and Research on the Conquest” *Archaeology and Biblical Research* 4: 110. For further arguments, cf. <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/07/12/The-Philistines-Enter-Canaan-Were-They-Egyptian-Lackeys-or-Invading-Conquerors.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Katzenstein, 912.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 913.

B': He seized the **city gates**, [and two gateposts and tore them loose bar and all]

A': He *brought* them to the mountain opposite Hebron.

In this schematic, we see that there are several pairs of corresponding terms. It should be observed that B', verse 3b, is unusually long which seems to be the result of a very precise description of the gate. Kim describes this account as a "concentric symmetry" indicating it is a "well-conceived structural and thematic unit."<sup>8</sup>

K. Wiese advances an extended argument which proposes that the Gaza event is an example of original tribal traditions, which formed the basis for the entire Samson narratives. The Gaza event is "thoroughly secular in substance and strongly unified in itself". Wiese argues that it has been transmitted in its "original pure, form" and it illustrates "classical simpleness."<sup>9</sup>

Wiese's emphasis on tribal traditions is of great importance. We would suggest that this is a Danite memory of Samson. While Samson's campaigns against the Philistines often involved Judah (Judges 15: 9-14), the Danites knew of his actions in Gaza. It was the Danites that came to Gaza and brought his body back for burial "between Zorah and Eshtaol" (Judges 16:31), the core area of the Danite territory. This may suggest that the concluding formula in Judges 15:20 is a marker of the end of the Judahite memories of Samson. By his exploits in Gaza and his burial in the original Danite territory, before their "migration" northward, Samson remains a bastion of the early history of the Danites.

## THE GAZITE HARLOT

The harlot, whom Samson visited, is an enigmatic and elusive figure in the Samson narratives. Her story differs greatly from the accounts of the other women in

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<sup>8</sup> J. Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle*. (Kampen:Pharos, 1992) 304.

<sup>9</sup> K. Wiese, *Zur Literarkritik des Buches der Richter* (Stuttgart: University Press, 1926) 54.

Samson's life; his bride and Delilah. The accounts of Samson's bride and Delilah have many thematic parallels.<sup>10</sup> For our purposes, it will suffice to say that the stories deal with Philistine treachery and female betrayal. In the wedding (Judges 14:15) and Delilah (Judges 16:5) stories, we read of the Philistines persuading the women to betray Samson and the means by which the women accomplished this goal. The harlot story moves the reader in an opposite direction. We are only told that the Philistines were informed that Samson was in the city. We are left to imagine if someone had noticed him in Gaza or were the Philistines told by the harlot herself, in another act of betrayal. These details matter little to the immediacy of the story or to its focus; the powerful actions of Samson.

There is no moral lesson here.<sup>11</sup> According to McKenzie, "the practice of prostitution in the ancient Near East. . . was extremely common" and the "number of allusions to prostitutes in the OT show that the practice was found in Israel". Unlike the accounts of his relationships with his bride and Delilah, there are no rebukes or foreshadowing of danger. The storyteller takes a neutral perspective on Samson's visit. Unlike the other accounts, wherein the exchange between the Philistines and the women take the attention and Samson himself is not in the scene, here the harlot and the Philistines recede into the background and Samson owns the spotlight. In other words, the narrative roles of Samson and the team of the woman and Philistines are reversed in this account in comparison to other accounts in the narratives. In the accounts of the bride and Delilah, Samson is the catalyst for the exchanges that transpire. In this account, the woman and the Philistines provide the catalyst for the actions of Samson.

Because the harlot recedes quickly into the background, she is very elusive to anyone trying to capture her identity. Kim, following E.L. Greenstein, argues that the

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. J.C. Exum, *Literary Patterns in the Samson Saga: an Investigation of Rhetorical Style in Biblical Prose*, Dissertation: Columbia University, 1976.

<sup>11</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 700. The term used for the harlot is *zonah*, the common word for prostitute. Prostitution existed in Ancient Israel, and there was a censure against Temple prostitution in Dt. 23:18, but seemed to be, possibly reluctantly, accepted as part of the culture. However, there are prophetic injunctions against prostitution; Jeremiah 5:7, Hosea 4:14, Amos 2:7.

harlot has a metaphorical role.<sup>12</sup> According to Kim, Samson represents Israel. Through this account, “the narrator effectively accused the Israelites of apostasy by specifying the woman was a ‘prostitute’.”

Such use of metaphor is not easily applied to the actual story. A stronger argument, perhaps, is that this short account was kept during the writing of the narratives because it worked well with the theme of Philistine oppression which runs through the Samson narratives and looks ahead to King David. It seems doubtful that the early storytellers incorporated this metaphor in the way Greenstein and Kim argue. J. Wharton supports our assessment, arguing that this is the “prototypical Samson story in the Israelite tradition.” It is based on ribald [coarse] humor, with a complete lack of theological elements. However, it provided a “low-risk outlet for anger, fear, and hope among people who had little means to press their cause against the Philistines.”<sup>13</sup>

The identity of the harlot, a common prostitute, can not be determined. Her name, if ever known at all, is lost to history. However, her importance is not to be found in her actions, but those of Samson. Her significance to the narratives, and to the theological content of the story, lies not in the imagery evoked by her name, as with Delilah. Her significance is to provide an insight to the working of YHWH through the powerful Judge of Israel.

The receding of the harlot and focus on Samson’s actions brings forth a strong theological theme. Perhaps, the key to understanding the theology is the reference to Hebron. Hebron is located in the hill country of Judah, located in a “depression in the mountains of Judah; the hills which surround it rise to an altitude of 3300 ft”.<sup>14</sup> The city is about 30 miles away from Gaza. To argue that Samson brought the gates to the city of Hebron is to misread the text and not grasp the full significance of the act. It is unlikely that Samson carried the gate all this distance. This assertion does not doubt his ability to do so. Rather, it affirms his knowledge of the magnitude of his action. There are several reasons not to argue that Samson carried the gates to Hebron.

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<sup>12</sup> J. Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle* (Kampen: Pharos, 1993) 305. Cf. E.L. Greenstein, “The Riddle of Samson,” *Prooftexts* 1 (1981) 237-260.

<sup>13</sup> J. Wharton, “The Secret of Yahweh: Story and Affirmation in Judges 13-16,” *Interpretation* (1973) 53-54.

<sup>14</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 350.

First, the text of Judges 16:3 reads, literally, that he “took them to the top of the mountain that was before the face of Hebron”.<sup>15</sup> The mountain, or hill, is not specifically designated by the text. The text simply states “*the mountain*”. The lack of an indefinite article is significant, as the text does not refer to a random, or unknown, mountain. The mountain to which the text refers seems to have been known to the original author, which could be why no further specifics were given or needed. This mountain is probably to be identified with the modern “El Montar” which is less than an hour east of Gaza and faces Hebron.<sup>16</sup> If this were the case, then we can infer that this story originated from someone who was very familiar with the area, a native of the region. It can also be inferred that such familiarity was presupposed of the listeners by the storyteller. Furthermore, this would support the idea that this short story is an original memory of Samson’s exploits.

Second, if Samson were to carry the gates to Hebron the act would be of limited impact. Only the residents of Hebron, and its environs, would have witnessed the spectacle. Samson has been considered a prankster by some scholars and a fierce guerilla, resistance, fighter by others. In either case, he would not settle for such a small-scale triumph. By this time in his campaigns against the Philistines, he is a national enemy and his deeds were on a national level.

Third, by placing the gates on a conspicuous mountain Samson humiliates the Philistines in the eyes of Israel. City gates on a hill on the frontier of Israel and Philistia could be seen by the entire Shephelah. Such a sight would instill hope and pride into an oppressed people. All scholars, detractors and proponents of Samson, agree that he embodied the religious-national spirit of Israel. McKenzie, typifying this perspective, writes that “he was the sole pride of the Israelite tribes in the time and place of Philistine domination where he lived... and was the instrument through whom YHWH helped His people.”<sup>17</sup>

Fourth, as noted, Gaza was near the overland trade routes that connected Syria and Egypt. It would be likely that the great caravans who traveled the routes knew of this landmark and it served as a “checkpoint” for their journey. It is certain that these

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<sup>15</sup> Our translation is supported by the ESV and the NAB.

<sup>16</sup> I. Loken, *The Old Testament Historical Books: An Introduction* (Camarillo: Salem, 2008) 88.

<sup>17</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 767.

peoples who traveled the trade routes were of the same countries that were invaded by the Sea Peoples, including the Philistines in the time before Samson. Now, these countries who felt the Philistine power could witness this testimony to the power of the God of Israel, and his Judge.

Based on these considerations, it seems quite unlikely that Samson carried the gates to Hebron, or even brought them close to the city. He knew full of the impact of his actions. In his exchange of increasing hostilities with the Philistines he would not miss the opportunity to heap such humiliation upon them. With this action, the irony is rich and the shame is great for the Philistines.

Moreover, the mountain itself is not the focus of the account. The importance lies in the theological significance of Hebron. Hebron was a vital part of Israel's history; Jacob was associated with the city (Genesis 35: 27, 37:14), it was scouted by the Israelites before they entered into Canaan (Numbers 13:22), it was part of the inheritance of Caleb (Judges 1:20).

Later, the city was the first location of David's kingship (2 Samuel 3-5:5). It was in this early period of his kingship that David broke the Philistines' power (2 Samuel 17:25). Therefore, we see an underlying theme of the Samson narratives; David completed the war which Samson began (Judges 13:5). In the account of the harlot, the reference to Hebron foreshadows the Davidic victory over the Philistines.

## **TRIUMPH AND DEATH IN GAZA**

It is significant to notice that Gaza serves as the location of Samson's triumphant carrying off of the gates, the pulling down of the Temple of Dagon, and his death.<sup>18</sup> Structurally, the story of Samson's visit to the harlot is a small scale version of the Delilah-death account, in 16:4-31. In masterful narration, 16:1-3 introduces and summarizes the themes which will be fully illustrated in the following accounts. The employment of foreshadowing and counter- imaging leads to a powerful theology. A look at the individual elements will reveal the underlying theological importance.

- Gaza is the location wherein both traditions come to their climactic triumph.

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<sup>18</sup> For more details regarding the dimensions of the temple and Samson's triumphant death, cf. <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/07/24/Between-the-Pillars-Revisiting-Samson-and-the-House-of-Dagon.aspx>

- Both women are associated with the Philistines; the harlot lives and works in Gaza and Delilah, possibly a Hebrew, is well-known to the Philistines of Gaza.
- The Philistines are present when Samson is in a compromised situation.
- The setting of Samson's climactic actions, the gates and the pillars, bear a striking resemblance; Samson used the bar of the gates to lift them as a unit and between the pillars he acted as the "bar" making the pillars one unit as they collapsed together.
- Samson *pulled up* the gates, symbolizing the ascendancy of Israel and the defeat of Gaza. He *pulled down* the temple symbolizing the descending of Philistine power and the defeat of Dagon. In his *pulling up/pulling down* Samson triumphs.

The key element which underlies the structure of Judges 16, both historically and theologically, is the future King, David. During his kingship we see the glory of Israel reaching its highest point and we see the breaking of the Philistine power. Once again we see David completing the actions of Samson.

## THE CITY GATES

The climax of the story is the moment when Samson tears loose the city gates of Gaza and walks off with them. The question of historical veracity of this feat of power will now demand our attention. City gates were part of the fortifications of a city. According to Herzog, fortifications were common in the Bronze and Iron Ages, the era of Samson. Often cities had several gates; the main gate, which was often up to 4.5 meters wide, and secondary or postern gates, which often only about one meter wide. The height of the gates is difficult to determine, as they were often recessed into a gate complex.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the Bronze Age, city gates developed into elaborate structures, of several types according to Herzog. Significant for our purposes, Herzog argues that the gates themselves were not attached to any city wall, but anchored to "short walls" or ramparts immediately beyond the walls.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, there would not be much commotion or destruction to the city wall proper as Samson pulled up the gates.

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<sup>19</sup> Z. Herzog, "Fortifications (Levant)", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* ( NY: Doubleday, 1992 ) 2:845.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:846.

The gates, which were the weakest point of a city's defenses, were fortified with towers and bastions. Often the principal gate was a "multiple entrance" with several pairs of doors.

Surrounding the entrances were bays or chambers which could be used as guardrooms or converted to defense position if the gates were forced.<sup>21</sup> R. Boling suggests that these structures could be as much as two-stories high. In the guardrooms, ambushers could wait inside the gate. This structure allowed the defenders to fire down upon their enemies.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, it does not seem likely that the Philistines were lying in wait for Samson outside or in front of the gate. If they were waiting in ambush, they would have done so in the safety of these chambers which surrounded the gate, unaware of Samson's actions.

The elaborate structure of city gates has been depicted by Herzog and most recently by Bryant Wood. Wood presents definitive evidence of an elaborate gate complex in Khirbet el-Maqatir. In 1996 the west chamber of the gate was excavated, and three gate socket stones have been discovered thus far. In 2009, some of the gate passageway was excavated to bedrock. The gate chamber is dated to the Late Bronze Age.<sup>23</sup> It is possible that Samson encountered a similar gate complex. Gaza is listed among the Canaanite cities in the Table of Nations (Genesis 10:19), so the Philistines may have simply kept the existing Canaanite structure.

Cooke describes the gates as being composed of two doors which turned on pins that were contained in sockets. The leaves were secured by a bar which was let into the posts on either side of the doors.<sup>24</sup> One must note that the bar must have been extremely strong to support the gates and withstand enemy advances. Yadin states that the bar was to fortify the center line of the gate, the weakest point. This bar ran across the back of the doors and was held by two pockets of differing depths. One pocket was very deep and the other was just deep enough to hold the end of the bar.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 297.

<sup>22</sup> R. Boling, *Judges* (NY: Doubleday, 1975) 248.

<sup>23</sup> B.G. Wood, "Digging up Joshua's Ai: The 2009-2010 Seasons at Kh. El-Maqatir", *Bible and Spade* (24) 11-13.

<sup>24</sup> G. Cooke, *The Book of Judges* (Cambridge: University Press, 1918) 149.

<sup>25</sup> Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands vol. I.* (NY; McGraw-Hill, 1963) 23.

Overall, a clear picture of Samson's actions emerges. The Philistines, after being informed of Samson's presence, saw that Samson was locked in the city and planned to capture him at dawn. Crossan argues that an all-night ambush, at the harlot's residence, would be senseless because they thought he was secure in the city and would be occupied all night with the harlot.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, there would be no way for him to escape. At midnight, after the Philistines had vacated the area, Samson left the harlot. He approached the gates. The text gives no indication of a complex structure. Therefore, we would suggest that the Philistines left the inner gate, or entrance, open to Samson in order to trap him within the gate structure. Once inside the structure he would be trapped against the outer gate, or main entrance, and they could attack him safely from the surrounding chambers. The Hebrew reads;

[He] took hold of the doors of the gate of the city and the two sideposts and pulled them up with the bar, and put them on his shoulders and took them to the top of the mountain opposite Hebron."<sup>27</sup>

The context of the verb, "to take hold of" ('ahaz) may provide a clue as to the correct interpretation of this action. While the primary meaning is "to grasp", in violent or hostile circumstances it takes the connotation of "to seize" or "to catch." The word can also take on the sense of "possession".<sup>28</sup> In light of the hostilities between Samson and the Philistines, this hostile connotation seems most fitting. It is a verb which introduces the significance of the action, not the mechanics of the feat of power. Simply put, Samson has gained control or possession of the gate.

The description of the parts of the gate corresponds with the aforementioned archaeological findings. The verb, "pulled them up" (nasa) has a root meaning of "to pull out tent-pegs" as in the image of to break camp. This image caused the verb to expand to entail the connotations of "set out" or "journey".<sup>29</sup> The choice of this verb was not accidental, it fits well with the image of Samson taking the gates toward Hebron. According to the text, as it stands, Samson used the bar running across the doors to pull up the gates, which lifted as a unit from the pins and out of the sockets. There would be no disruption of the actual city walls, according to Herzog's findings, and the

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<sup>26</sup> J.D. Crossan, "Judges", *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 1:160.

<sup>27</sup> Author's translation

<sup>28</sup> H. Wolf, "'ahaz, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:32.

<sup>29</sup> M. Wilson, "nasa", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:583.

noise may have been minimal. Therefore, this short account must be seen as historically plausible and accurate.

### **The Strength of Samson**

In the description Samson's feat, the storyteller took great pains to describe the gate and Samson's strength. We would suggest that Samson pulled the gates out of their sockets and hoisted them onto his back.<sup>30</sup> According to B. Weider, the position of a weight resting on one's back and being supported by the legs is "probably the most primitive, most natural, and most effective application of strength."<sup>31</sup> In this way, Samson could also see his surroundings, instead of walking blindly toward Hebron.

In the details, the narrator gives us a glimpse of the size and natural strength of Samson. It seems that the narrator is purposefully avoiding the theological aspects of Samson in order to depict the physical size of him. Over the centuries, there has been much controversy over the issue of Samson's size. The textual clues in Judges indicate that he was a huge man, for his time. This incident with the gates presupposes a man of substantial width; otherwise he would not be able to control the wide main gates. After he was captured, he was put to work in the "mill house", (Judges 16: 21) according to K. van der Toorn. Furthermore, van der Toorn strongly asserts, that this work was done by slaves.<sup>32</sup> McKenzie suggests that this work was done by "blindfolded asses", relegating Samson to a position lower than a slave; as a beast of burden.<sup>33</sup> Lastly, Samson being able to reach the pillars of the temple of Dagon indicates a man of over six feet in height. All of these actions demand a powerfully built man.

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<sup>30</sup> We would suggest that Samson lifted up the gate with his back to it. From a biomechanical perspective, it would be an exceedingly awkward lift if he approached the bar (of the gate) face first. However, lifting the bar from behind him affords more biomechanical leverage. Modern day weight lifting records men lifting in excess of 600 pounds, in lift called the "Hack Squat", with the weight behind them. In another lift, called the "Reverse Shrug", wherein the weight is lifted in a short pull with only the upper back muscles, modern men have been recorded lifting 400-700 pounds. In this position, for Samson to exert maximal power (being about 6.5 feet tall) the gates would have to be about 3.5 feet off the ground, a height that would accommodate the guards, who were of normal size for the period, which current studies place at about 5' 3".

<sup>31</sup> B. Weider, *The Strongest Man in History: Louis Cyr* (Newark: Selco, 1976) 27. That a human being is capable of lifting this type of weight has been proven in modern times. In a lift called the "Back Lift", wherein the weight is lifted on the back with help from the legs, Louis Cyr lifted 4000+ pounds on May 27, 1892 and Paul Anderson lifted 6, 270 pounds on June 12, 1957. The latter is considered the heaviest weight lifted in history by the record books.

<sup>32</sup> K. van der Toorn, "Mill, Millstone", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (NY: Doubleday, 1992 ) 4:831.

<sup>33</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *The World of the Judges* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 156.

To assert that Samson was a huge man is to assert God's hand in history. Through the expanse of Salvation History, God used a wide array of individuals to accomplish His ends. The personalities, backgrounds, and cultures of His Chosen Ones were perfectly suited for the roles they were to play. In light of this, to equip Samson with immense physical size and strength is a testimony to God's complete control over history, wherein His will unfolds. God prepared Samson in every way for his vital role in Salvation History; with an elemental and powerful faith, as evidenced by his nazirite devotion and 7 braids of hair (Judges 16: 19), and with uncontainable power, as evidenced in the irruptions of the Spirit (Judges 14:6, 19, 15:14). Therefore, physical size and strength should also be counted among his gifts from God.

However, in the episode with the gates the narrator is avoiding making Samson into fantastic proportions. By emphasizing the use of the bar, the narrator is not portraying Samson as being larger than gates, but as a big man who was endowed with special gifts from God. The girl and the Philistines were the showcases for this gift of pure strength.

### **A Theological Significance**

That Samson walked off with the gates has considerable significance. McKenzie argues that to possess the gates of a city is to conquer the city (Genesis 24:60).<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Samson gains a bloodless victory over the Philistines. He humiliates the Philistines before their enemies and subject peoples, yet no life was lost. He could have engaged his would-be captors in the morning, but this restraint or avoidance of conflict shows that Samson is not a wanton killer. He is a Judge of Israel who fights, and kills, for a purpose and a sense of mission.

In the broader context of the Ancient Near East, this story may have been the historical progenitor of the famous "labor" of the mythical Heracles in which he walks off with Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guarded the "gates" of the underworld. All versions of this myth, ancient and modern, use the term "gates". In this mythological account, no lives were lost nor were anyone injured. However, it much more stylized

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<sup>34</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 298.

than the Samson account. Most scholars of ancient texts opt for the shorter, more rustic, accounts in trying to determine an original version. This can be applied here. Judges 16:1-3, while tightly narrated and constructed, does not exhibit the polish or refinements given to accounts by the writers of the Grecian myths. The story of the Gazite harlot is historically verifiable whereas the myth of Heracles and Cerberus is not. Therefore, this points to the conclusion that Samson was not a Hebrew or Levantine Heracles. Rather, it suggests that Alcides, who was named Heracles as a young adult, was a Grecian Samson. Furthermore, this account, and others, of Samson had a theological impact far beyond the boundaries of Israel.

## **CONCLUSION**

Among the women in the Bible, this harlot, a common prostitute, is a singular figure. Throughout the Bible, even in the Samson narratives, women who appear in the accounts form the focus of the action. This harlot, visited by the powerful Danite, disappears from the account but gains her significance in several ways. First, on a base level, we see the benign acceptance of prostitution in the Ancient Near East.

Historically, the mention of the harlot introduces a feat of strength of Samson that can be supported by scientific investigations, modern records and biomechanical studies. This means that this story is of high historical quality and should not be dismissed or overlooked. It provides a valuable glimpse into the historical circumstances of Israel and the Philistines.

Literarily, the account serves a transitional function. It serves to remind the audience that Samson cared little about cultural differences in his dalliances with the opposite sex and also to reintroduce the audience to his immense strength. The account also looks ahead to the events of the prison and between the pillars of the temple, when there was no Divine consecration or bestowals of the Spirit of the Lord. It is the beginning of the portrayal of his elemental faith. As he stood between the pillars, he was alone with his faith. Admittedly, Judges 16: 22 suggests that his hair was

growing back. The exact meaning of this verse is not clear.<sup>35</sup> However, there is no mention of his hair or the Spirit in the death account (Judges 16: 23-30). His prayer is out of a pure and tremendous faith in God's power reaching him in the heart of an enemy temple. Herein, by faith, Samson completed his mission; to *begin* the deliverance from the hand of the Philistines (Judges 13:5). In his beginning of the deliverance, he became a Judge in the fullest sense of the role. It is this faith that is remembered by the letter to the Hebrews (11:32). The girl, unnamed, serves as a lynchpin upon which this vital transitional account turns.

Perhaps the most important, and interesting, aspect of this story is the theological idea that Samson's visit to this harlot was used by YHWH to help make His Name known to the nations. Word of this event would spread quickly; Samson, the undefeated warrior of Israel, once again handed the Philistines a humiliating defeat. This time, however, the defeat came in their own city of Gaza, where Dagon was the chief deity but could not stop Samson.<sup>36</sup> Also, in this story of the harlot; we see the recurring Biblical theme of YHWH using other nations and their peoples to accomplish his will; the harlot was undeniably a Philistine girl. This harlot stands in a singular position in the background of YHWH moving history to prepare for and to foreshadow his Davidic king, the promised eternal kingship, and the messianic line.

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<sup>35</sup> This could either be masterful narrative foreshadowing, telling the audience that all will be put to right or that Samson has consecrated himself in a renewal of the vow to keep his hair uncut.. It is highly unlikely that his hair grew to the length it was before Delilah and that the guards never noticed or kept his hair cut.

<sup>36</sup> In the Ancient Near East there existed a theology which could be called "territorial dominion", the belief that a deity is at its strongest in the area in which it was worshipped. It was a form of Henotheism or Monolatry. For Samson, who worshipped the God of Israel, to enter into a city of Dagon, the chief god of the Philistines, and take the gates away would be contrary to this ancient theology. Cf. "Samson's Death Account and the Ancient Theology of Territorial Dominion," *American Journal of Biblical Theology* 11:15 (Sunday, June 13, 2010) <http://www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/Roskoski01.pdf>

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Writer's note: As a Certified Strength Training Instructor and holder of several lifting records and titles, as well as being a Biblical Theologian, this story has always held an acute interest for me. Although to verify its historicity, I had to undertake a field study, far from the Holy Land and Gaza, to the gym floor. Therefore, I wish to acknowledge and thank Apollon gym (Edison, NJ) and its expert staff and trainers, particularly Irina Veselova and Richard Gray, who "consulted" with me on the biomechanics of the possibility of Samson pulling up the gates. Their help and input is greatly appreciated.