



Biblical Text

After that, [Samson] fell in love with a woman in the Wadi Sorek, named Delilah.

The lords of the Philistines went up to her and said, “Coax him and find out what makes him so strong, and how we can overpower him, tie him up, and make him helpless; and we’ll each give you eleven hundred shekels of silver.”

So Delilah said to Samson, “Tell me, what makes you so strong? And how could you be tied up and made helpless?” Samson replied, “If I were to be tied with seven fresh tendons that had not been dried, I should become as weak as an ordinary man.” So the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven fresh tendons that had not been dried. She bound him with them, while an ambush was waiting in her room. Then she called out to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” - and he pulled the tendons apart, as a strand of tow comes apart at the touch of fire. So the secret of his strength remained unknown.

Then Delilah said to Samson, “Oh, you deceived me; you lied to me! Do tell me now how you could be tied up.” He said, “If I were to be bound with new ropes that had never been used, I would become as weak as an ordinary man.” So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, while an ambush was waiting in a room. And she cried, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” But he tore them off his arms like a thread. Then Delilah said to Samson, “You have been deceiving me all along; you have been lying to me! Tell me, how could you be tied up?” He answered her, “If you weave seven locks of my head into the web.” And she pinned it with a peg and cried to him, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!” Awaking from his sleep, he pulled out the peg, the loom, and the web.

Then she said to him, “How can you say you love me, when you don’t confide in me? This makes three times that you’ve deceived me and haven’t told me what makes you so strong.” Finally, after she had nagged him and pressed him constantly, he was wearied to death and he confided everything to her. He said to her, “No razor has ever touched my head, for I have been a nazirite to God since I was in my mother’s womb. If my hair were cut, my strength would leave me and I should become as weak as an ordinary man.”

Sensing that he had confided everything to her, Delilah sent for the lords of the Philistines, with this message: "Come up once more, for he has confided everything to me." And the lords of the Philistines came up and brought the money with them. She lulled him to sleep on her lap. Then she called in a man, and she had him cut off the seven locks of his head; thus she weakened him and made him helpless: his strength slipped away from him. She cried, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" And he awoke from his sleep, thinking he would break loose and shake himself free as he had the other times. For he did not know that the LORD had departed from him. The Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes. They brought him down to Gaza and shackled him in bronze fetters, and he became a mill slave in the prison. After his hair was cut off, it began to grow back.

-Judges 16:4-22

Historical Account

However, [Samson] at length transgressed the laws of his country, and altered his own regular way of living, and imitated the strange customs of foreigners, which thing was the beginning of his miseries; for he fell in love with a woman that was a harlot among the Philistines: her name was Delilah, and he lived with her...

Now this woman, in the constant conversation Samson had with her, pretended that she took it very ill that he had such little confidence in her affections to him, that he would not tell her what she desired, as if she would not conceal what she knew it was for his interest to have concealed... at length Samson, upon Delilah's prayer, (for he was doomed to fall into some affliction,) was desirous to please her, and told her that God took care of him, and that he was born by his providence, and that "it is that I suffer my hair to grow, God having charged me never to shave my head, and my strength is according to the increase and continuance of my hair." When she had learned thus much, and had deprived him of his hair, she delivered him up to his enemies, when he was not strong enough to defend himself from their attempts upon him; so they put out his eyes, and bound him, and had him led about among them.

But in process of time Samson's hair grew again. And there was a public festival among the Philistines, when the rulers, and those of the most eminent character, were feasting together; (now the room wherein they were had its roof supported by two pillars;) so they sent for Samson, and he was brought to their feast, that they might insult him in their cups. **Hereupon he, thinking it one of the greatest misfortunes, if he should not be able to revenge himself when he was thus insulted, persuaded the boy that led him by the hand, that he was weary and wanted to rest himself, and desired he would bring him near the pillars; and as soon as he came to them, he rushed with force against them, and overthrew the house, by overthrowing its pillars, with three thousand men in it, who were all slain, and Samson with them.**

And such was the end of this man, when he had ruled over the Israelites twenty years.

And indeed this man deserves to be admired for his courage and strength, and magnanimity at his death, and that his wrath against his enemies went so far as to die himself with them. But as for his being ensnared by a woman, that is to be ascribed to human nature, which is too weak to resist the temptations to that sin; but we ought to bear him witness, that in all other respects he was one of extraordinary virtue.

- Flavius Josephus (1st century Roman-Jewish historian)

Questions

1. According to these two accounts, who is Delilah? What is clear and what is unclear about her?
2. What does the text say about her personality? What inferences can you draw?
3. How does Delilah drive the action in the story?
4. How does Josephus' narrative fill in the gaps in the Biblical text?

Classical Midrash

HE FELL IN LOVE WITH A WOMAN IN THE WADI-SOREK: This indicates the futility of this relationship, like an *ilan she-rayk* (אילן שריק) a tree that does not bear fruit.

-Bamidbar Rabbah 9:24

The Mishna provides additional examples of people who were treated by Heaven commensurate with their actions. Samson followed his eyes, therefore he was punished measure for measure, as the Philistines gouged out his eyes, as it is stated: "And the Philistines laid hold on him, and put out his eyes."

The Gemara continues its discussion of Samson. The verse states: "And it came to pass afterward, that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah." It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi says: Even if she had not been called by the name Delilah, it would have been fitting that she be called Delilah, for she weakened [*dildela* / דילדלה] his strength, she weakened his heart, and she weakened his deeds, thereby decreasing his merits.

The Gemara explains: She weakened his strength, as it is written: "And she made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man and had the seven locks of his head shaved off; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him." She weakened his heart, as it is written: "And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the Philistines, saying: Come up this once, for he has told me all his heart." She weakened his deeds, thereby decreasing his merits, as the Divine Presence left him, as it is written: "And she said: The Philistines are upon you, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep and said: I will go out as at other times and shake myself. But he knew not that the Lord was departed from him." The verse states: "And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart." The Gemara asks: From where did she know that this time he had told her the truth about the source of his strength, as he had lied about it previously? Rabbi Ḥanin says that Rav says: Words of truth are recognizable, and she felt that this time he was telling the truth. Abaye says differently: She knew about Samson being a righteous individual, that he would not express the name of Heaven in vain. Once he said: "And he told her all his heart, saying to her: There has not come a razor upon my head; for I have been a Nazirite unto God from

my mother's womb." She said: Now he is certainly saying the truth. The verse states: "And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, that his soul was vexed unto death." The Gemara asks: What is the meaning of "and urged him"? How did she do so? Rabbi Yitzhak of the school of Rabbi Ami says: At the moment immediately before his completion of the act of intercourse, she slipped away from beneath him. By doing this, she urged him to reveal his secret.

-*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 9B*

Contemporary Midrash

Delilah is the only woman in the Samson story whose name is given. Whatever its etymology, her name is a wordplay on Hebrew *layla*, "night," for as the night overcomes the mighty sun (the name Samson, *Shimshon*, is related to "sun," *shemesh*), so Delilah overcomes the apparently invincible strong man, Samson.

- J. Cheryl Exum (contemporary Jewish feminist scholar)

Close your eyes and think of Delilah. Whom do you see? What does she look like? For many contemporary readers, the name Delilah evokes a jewel-toned tapestry, whose multihued threads stitch together a woman's presence – dark smoky eyes, delicious lips, whispered secrets, intimate smiles, the sparkle of a razor not quite concealed.¹ We will not, however, find these images presented explicitly in Judges 16; instead, we lap them up from the many cultural retellings of this biblical narrative performed in literature, music and the visual arts. Within these retellings, Delilah shines as leading lady; shamelessly seductive, she is the quintessential femme fatale, whose intoxicating sexuality compels *and* repels our gaze. As J. Cheryl Exum notes, Delilah's cultural afterlives have become emblematic of the dangerous allure of the untamed female body.²

- Caroline Blyth, *Reimagining Delilah's Afterlives as Femme Fatale: The Lost Seduction*



This battle between a nagging woman and a susceptible male is also a contest between a domesticating woman and a "nature man" or "wild man." Delilah destroys that which made Samson different so that he has become like any man. The contest between woman as civilizing agent and half-civilized man is a staple of American history, encoded in the iconic relationship of the schoolmarm and the cowboy on the American frontier.

-Tikvah Frymer-Kensky,
Reading the Women of the Bible