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Narrative Obscurity of Samson's חֲדָרָא in Judges 14.14 and 18*

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Abstract

Scholars have often found Judg. 14.18 to be an unsatisfactory solution to Samson's riddle in 14.14. This situation has prompted a number of alternative scholarly proposals, which attempt to settle the riddle's unresolved aspects and restore a solution. Yet the complex relationship between the riddle and the narrative that surrounds it has received little attention. The information provided by the surrounding narrative obscures the riddle's meaning and resists any attempt to locate an unambiguous solution. While it should help to clarify the riddle's solution, the narrative actually creates an obscuring atmosphere that calls the reader to respond to the riddle by following a variety of interpretive trajectories running throughout the Samson story.

Samson's riddle in Judg. 14.14 resists any easy completion. Biblical scholars have often found 14.18 to be an unsatisfactory solution to the riddle in 14.14. This situation has prompted a number of alternative scholarly proposals, which attempt to settle the riddle's unresolved aspects and restore a solution for the purposes of completion and acceptable closure. In his important work *The Genesis of Secrecy*, however, Kermode questions this sort of approach to biblical parables and riddles:¹

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1. Kermode uses the terms 'riddle' and 'parable' in a very similar fashion. 'But in the Greek Bible it [*parabole*] is equivalent to Hebrew *mashal*, which means "riddle" or

...we might try another comparison and say that the interpretation of parable is like the interpretation of dreams, for a dream-text, when understood, disappears, is consumed by its interpretation, and ceases to have affective force... But this notion, that interpretation completes parable, and there's an end, is much too crude. The parable of the Good Samaritan...ends with a question: 'Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?' There is only one possible answer: 'The Samaritan'. Or so it would appear to common sense; though common sense is not our business. The answer may leave an interpreter unsatisfied, because a narrative of some length, like the Good Samaritan, works hard to make the answer obvious and in so doing provides a lot of information which seems too important to be discarded, once an easy act of completion is performed.²

One encounters a similar dilemma with Samson's riddle. In one sense, the surrounding narrative has worked hard to make the apparent answer in 14.18 obvious. The reader receives privileged information regarding Samson's battle with the lion and the honey found in its carcass (14.5-9). The reader is told that Samson's wife coaxed the answer from Samson and then relayed it to the Philistines (14.17). This detail creates the impression that the Philistines have the correct answer, an impression that is further supported by Samson's reaction to the Philistine's answer in 14.18b-19. In working to make the answer obvious, however, the surrounding narrative provides much information that cannot easily be discarded. For instance, while the 'eater' (לֹאכֵל) in 14.14 appears to be the lion, the only ones who do any eating are Samson and his parents. Once the obvious answer is given, the riddle should be consumed by its interpretation, and an act of completion or closure performed. In Judges 14, however, information given to point to the seemingly obvious answer actually calls into question the answer given.

After a brief review of scholarly solutions to Samson's riddle, I will explore the tensions that arise from the narrative's obscuring effect on the riddle's answer in Judges 14. Instead of pointing to just one solution or interpretation which completes or closes the riddle, the narrative creates an obscuring atmosphere that calls the reader to respond to the riddle by following a variety of interpretive trajectories running throughout the Samson story.

"dark saying"... Sometimes the Greek word is also used to translate *hidah*, meaning "riddle". Riddle and parable may be much the same' (F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979], p. 23).

2. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, pp. 24-25.

1. Proposed Scholarly Solutions to Samson's Riddle

For the most part, scholarly dissatisfaction with the Philistines' answer has not resulted from the tension between the surrounding narrative and the riddle, but rather the tension between 14.14 and 14.18. Gunkel noticed that the riddle comes in the form of a statement (14.14) and the solution comes in the form of a question (14.18).³ He argued that the two verses actually contain two originally separate riddles that were only later connected by the context of the wedding feast.⁴ Within the context of the wedding feast, Müller argues that certain words function as code-words (*Chiffre*). For instance, אֶבֶר is a code-word for 'a lion' as well as the 'bridegroom' and 'one who vomits' because all three are considered strong in terms of their appetite.⁵ Gressman took מִתּוֹק as 'sweet wine' and argued that the answer to the riddle in 14.14 is connected to digestive activity. The vomiting brought on by the strong food and drink at the wedding feast would be too strong for any person to control.⁶ Tur Sinai

3. H. Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), p. 53. See also J.R. Porter, 'Samson's Riddle in Judges XIV. 14, 18', *JTS* 13 (1962), pp. 106-109; E. Greenstein, 'The Riddle of Samson', *Prooftexts* 1 (1981), pp. 237-60 (242).

4. Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätze*, pp. 52-54. For similar conclusions, see O. Eissfeldt, 'Die Rätsel in Jud 14', *ZAW* 30 (1910), pp. 132-35 (134); H. Gressman, *Die Anfänge Israels (von 2. Mosis bis Richter und Ruth): übers., erklärt und mit Einleitungen versehen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1914), p. 251. Crenshaw understands Samson's retort in 14.18b as another riddle and argues that there are in fact three riddles. See J. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), p. 120. Nel, however, whose article gives an excellent overview of scholarly considerations of Samson's riddle, strongly disagrees with the position that there are two (or even three) riddles in 14.14 and 18 because the Philistines' reply seems to be accepted by Samson as the answer. See P. Nel, 'The Riddle of Samson (Judg 14, 14.18)', *Bib* (1985), pp. 534-45.

5. H.P. Müller, 'Der Begriff 'Rätsel' im Alten Testament', *VT* 20 (1970), pp. 467-68. See also Nel, 'The Riddle of Samson', p. 537. Crenshaw, who argues that Samson's riddle in 14.14 is a *double entendre* which implies several possible answers, writes, 'On one level, the ciphers point to "vomit" as the answer to Samson's riddle: Food came from the eater; sweet things came from the strong person. Thus understood, the riddle refers to the aftermath of wedding festivities during which valiant young men were unable to retain such unaccustomed delicacies' (Crenshaw, *Samson*, pp. 114-15).

6. Gressman, *Die Anfänge Israels*, pp. 250-51. See Porter's critique of Gressman's argument, 'Samson's Riddle', p. 106.

concludes that the lack of coherence between 14.14 and 18 suggests that there is not a riddle here at all.⁷ While some scholars simply dismiss the conundrum as unsolvable,⁸ others argue that the formulation of the riddle itself provides sufficient inductive clues for obtaining its correct solution. Bauer suggested the original word for 'honey' is 'ri, an equivalent of the Arabic 'ary, which is phonologically identical to the Hebrew word for lion.⁹ Based on inductive clues, Nel suggests that

solving the riddle will obviously then focus on these two key-words, רִי and מֶתוֹק... In order to arrive at the correct answer (v. 18a), the corpus of the riddle (v. 14) is skillfully constructed so as to highlight the keywords and simultaneously to signify a particular reality that is both 'strong' and 'sweet'... We have no explicit indications that v. 14a as such has love as its content. V. 14a, however, is pointing semantically to a specific reality and is structurally composed in such a way as to indicate and anticipate the popular proverb of v. 18. V. 18 has 'love' as its content.¹⁰

'Love' as the suggested solution is not original to Nel. Gunkel understood רִי in 14.18 as 'bitter' (*gierig*) based on Isa. 56.11 and Ecclus 6.4, 19.3, and 40.30, and contrasted it with the adjective 'sweet' (מֶתוֹק). He then compared the riddle to similar metaphors in Song 2.3 and 8.6 and concluded that only love can be seen as both bitter and sweet.¹¹ As Nel

7. N.H. Tur Sinai, 'The Riddle in the Bible', *HUCA* 1 (1924), pp. 125-49.

8. See M. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 136; J. Gray, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1967), p. 351; G. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1918), p. 335; J. Soggin, *Judges* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 241.

9. H. Bauer, 'Zu Simsons Rätsel in Richter Kapitel 14', *ZDMG* 66 (1912), pp. 473-74. From Bauer's analysis, Gaster, Porter, and Segert all arrive at similar conclusions. See T. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 436; Porter, 'Samson's Riddle', pp. 107-109; S. Segert, 'Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative in Judges XIII-XVI', *VT* 34 (1984), pp. 454-61 (456).

10. Nel, 'The Riddle of Samson', pp. 541, 543.

11. Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätze*, pp. 52-54. Gressman and Eissfeldt also understand the riddle's solution to be love. Eissfeldt, 'Die Rätsel in Jud 14', p. 134; Gressman, *Die Anfänge Israels*, pp. 250-51. Crenshaw sees 14.18 as containing 'four cipher words—'kel signifies lion, i.e. the bridegroom; ma'kal represents honey, i.e. the sperm; while 'az and matoq are indicators of the quality of love' (J. Crenshaw, 'Wisdom', in J. Hayes [ed.], *Old Testament Form Criticism* [San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1974], pp. 225-64 [243]; see also Crenshaw, *Samson*, pp. 115-16). Porter critiques Gunkel by noting that, unlike Judg. 14.18, in Isa. 56.11 and Ecclus 6.4, 19.3,

notes, among scholars, 'the "erotic" explanation seems to be winning ground'.¹²

Heavily influenced by form-critical methods, many of the interpretations considered above have generally presupposed that the answer to the riddle must be found in information available to one or more of the characters within the story. This information may include an awareness of word plays or certain contexts such as the lion incident or the wedding feast. The reader, however, encounters the riddle as part of a larger narrative. Just as the characters' approach to the riddle may be influenced by awareness of their context, the reader's approach should be influenced by his or her awareness of the riddle's larger narrative context and its various themes and motifs.¹³ Unlike the characters, the reader must examine how the narrative and its themes and motifs affect the riddle and vice versa. Such an examination may lead to interpretations of the riddle generally overlooked by scholarly considerations as well as interpretations that explore more latent themes within the Samson story.

2. *Obscuring Effects in the Samson Story*

The Samson story creates an unstable environment which resists closure and promotes obscurity through emphasizing themes of ignorance and secrecy, selectively reporting crucial information, and often undermining

and 40.30, the word עו is qualified by נפש. Thus, עו does not have the same sense in 14.18 as in the other passages. See Porter, 'Samson's Riddle', p. 106.

12. Nel, 'The Riddle of Samson', p. 558.

13. Generally, scholars have ignored the reader's context when interpreting Samson's riddle. There are, however, some welcome exceptions. See C. Camp and C. Fontaine, 'The Words of the Wise and their Riddles', in S. Niditch (ed.), *Text and Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 127-51. Camp and Fontaine examine the riddle through different levels of reading, including both those of the narrator and the character. More recently, Camp has noted the multivalent quality of the riddle and proposed several different possible solutions (e.g. love, sex, domesticity, language, and so on) while exploring larger themes in the Samson story. See C. Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (JSOTSup, 320; Gender, Culture, Theory, 9; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 94-143. In a provocative article, Greenstein argues that the entire Samson story should be read as a riddle or what he calls a 'riddle-like text' (Greenstein, 'The Riddle of Samson', p. 246). He is not as concerned with a detailed interpretation of the riddle in 14.14 and 18 as he is with the riddle of the entire narrative, but by approaching the entire narrative as a riddle, Greenstein is very sensitive to the obscuring effect that the narrative as a whole has on its various parts.

its own aims and goals. Turning to a more detailed exploration of the Samson narrative, one sees that it emphasizes the themes of ignorance and secrecy through its choice and repetition of vocabulary. The repetition of ידע provides one such case.¹⁴ In 14.3, Samson's parents object to Samson's request for a Philistine bride; however, the narrative reveals their ignorance regarding their situation in the next verse: 'His father and his mother did not know (ידעו) that this was from the Lord because the Lord was seeking a pretext against the Philistines. At that time, the Philistines ruled over Israel.'¹⁵ Although Samson's parents are told something of the divine plan in Judges 13, they know little of the specifics. The characters must assess the situation without enough information to do so properly. The root ידע also appears in 16.9 and 20. After the Philistines' failed attempt to discover the source of Samson's strength, 16.9 reports: 'but his strength was not known (ולא נודע)'. In 16.20, after Samson's hair is cut, he wakes thinking nothing has changed, 'but he did not know (לא ידע) that the Lord had departed from him'. As with 14.4, ידע is linked to ignorance of the Lord's actions. Knowledge of the Lord's actions is of paramount importance for the characters to assess their situation properly, but is not always accessible to them.

The themes of ignorance and secrecy are further developed through the use of נגד, חידה, and משל. The root נגד appears 21 times in the Samson story.¹⁶ The majority of these occurrences are in the context of some sort of riddle or secrecy.¹⁷ The frequent repetition of the root נגד emphasizes the importance of withheld or disclosed information and the characters' dependence on each other for this critical information. Nearly half of the

14. Exum notes that the reference in 13.16 introduces the important motif of knowing (ידע) and not knowing which runs throughout the Samson story. See J.C. Exum, 'Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga', *JSOT* 19 (1981), pp. 3-29 (8 n. 13). See also 13.21.

15. Unless indicated otherwise, all biblical translations are the author's own and follow the MT. 15.11 plays off of the roots ידע and משל in 14.4. Concerned about Philistine retaliation for Samson's burning of the fields, the Israelites ask Samson, 'Do you not know (ידעת) that the Philistines are rulers (משל ים) over us?' With this allusion to the information given in 14.4, the narrative reminds the reader that the Lord is working through these events. The Israelites' reaction, however, suggests that they are unaware of this vital piece of information. See Exum, 'Aspects of Symmetry and Balance', pp. 8-9.

16. See 13.6, 10; 14.2, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 (three times), 17 (twice), 19; 16.6, 10, 13, 15, 17, 18.

17. See, e.g., 13.6; 14.6, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19; 16.6, 10, 13, and so on.

occurrences (eight of 17) of the rare word חידה in the Hebrew Bible occur in Judges 14 (vv. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19). The frequent repetition of חידה focuses the reader's attention on Samson's secret.¹⁸ In the Hebrew Bible, five of the nine occurrences of חידה outside of Judges 14 occur in the context of the root מַשַּׁל (Ezek. 17.2; Hab. 2.6; Pss. 49.5; 78.2; Prov. 1.6 [see also Wis. 8.8; Ecclus 39.3; 47.17]). While מַשַּׁל can often mean 'rule', it can also mean 'proverb' or 'parable'. In Prov. 1.6 and Ezek. 17.2, מַשַּׁל connotes some type of enigma or riddle. In Judg. 14.4b, the narrative directly addresses the reader and informs him or her that, 'In that time, the Philistines were ruling over Israel' (וּבַעֵת הַהִיא פִּלְשְׁתִּים (מַשְׁלִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל)). The statement should inform, clarify, and provide the reader with necessary contextual information. However, מַשְׁלִים could also be read as a qal participle meaning 'ones who speak in proverbs',¹⁹ producing the reading, 'In that time, the Philistines were speaking in proverbs with Israel'. Thus, if read one way, the note informs the reader of certain political power dynamics that are important for interpreting the Samson story. If read another way, the note informs the reader of the theme of secrecy which is equally important for interpreting the story. Thus, a note that is supposed to clarify a contextual point for the reader actually suggests two very different but mutually important points upon which the Samson story builds. While attempting to clarify its point, the narrative obscures its point.²⁰

18. As Exum observes, 'Repetition of the key words "tell" and "riddle" expand what could have been told briefly into a colorful and suspenseful account' (Exum, 'Aspects of Symmetry and Balance', p. 14).

19. For such a use of מַשְׁלִים, see Ezek. 18.2. One encounters a similar dilemma with the use of the same word in Judg. 15.11. Are the Israelites asking Samson if he knows that the Philistines are ruling over them or speaking proverbs with them? The second possibility is intriguing if read in light of 14.18, which many scholars believe reflects a popular proverb.

20. The narrative further undermines itself in the etiological note given in 15.19. Polzin explores the ambiguity at the center of the narrative's explanatory aside: 'For since Samson has been described as both naming (*wayyiqra*) a place and calling upon (*wayyiqra*) Yahweh, 'en haqqore may mean "Crier's Spring" or "Namer's Spring". So that when the narrator's explanation tells us *why* the spring is so named, is he emphasizing Samson's previous knowledge and power whereby he had named the hill after his victorious slaughter of a thousand men, or is he referring to Samson's weakness and ignorance wherein he had just called out for help from Yahweh? The very naming *haqqore* cries out for ambiguity over certainty, obscurity over clarity, in the nature of the explanation itself' (R. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist* [Bloomington: Indiana

Beginning in Judges 13, the narrative makes it very difficult for the reader to ascertain who is telling the truth. In part, the abundance of ignorance among the characters results from the lack of full disclosure in communication between one party and another. Quite often, the information withheld is crucial for a proper assessment of the situation. For example, in 13.3-5, the angel of the Lord tells Samson's mother that she will have a son who will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines and who must not cut his hair because he will be a Nazirite from his birth. When Samson's mother reports her encounter to Manoah, she does not tell him about the prohibition against the razor or Samson's mission against the Philistines (13.7).²¹ These omissions are hardly superfluous. From the first reported interactions between the characters, the reader is made aware that the characters are being selective in what they are reporting to each other. By ch. 16, this selectivity has developed into Samson's repeated outright lies to Delilah regarding the source of his strength. Frequently, the reader would like more information as well. Samson's speech in 16.17 shows that he is aware of the prohibition against razors and his status as a Nazirite, but he does not mention his mission against the Philistines. Does he even know of his mission?²² Does he tell Delilah everything that he knows? The narrative leaves the reader painfully in the dark regarding his grasp on his own situation.²³

The characters and the narrative further intensify uncertainty by constantly undermining their own goals. Responding to the Philistines' threat in 14.15, Samson's wife tells the Philistines the answer that Samson told her. As a result, Samson responds to the Philistines' actions with several acts of vengeance. After his wife is given to another man, he burns the fields of the Philistines (15.3-5). The Philistines respond with an act of vengeance of their own: 'And the Philistines went up and they burned [Samson's wife] and her father with fire' (15.6b). By telling the Philistines

University Press, 1980], pp. 190-91). On paronomasia in this verse, see also Segert, 'Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative', p. 458.

21. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, pp. 182-83.

22. Consider Samson's justification for his actions against the Philistines in 15.11b: 'Just as they did to me, thus I did to them'. Samson does not seem to see his action as part of a larger divine plan of deliverance for his people, but rather as part of a personal vendetta.

23. Regarding 14.4b, Polzin notes that the narrator highlights the ignorance of the reader by including details that would be common knowledge to any of the characters in the story. See Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, p. 184.

the answer to the riddle, Samson's wife sets into motion a chain of events which results in the very same fate she had hoped to avoid.²⁴

In 14.18a, the Philistines say to Samson, 'What is sweeter than honey and what is stronger than a lion?' What do the Philistines mean? The larger narrative obscures the answer. As noted above, several scholars have suggested that 14.18 is not an answer to the riddle in 14.14, but rather a separate riddle or popular proverb about love. Both the Philistines and the reader know that the answer is given in the context of a wedding feast; therefore, the narrative context may support 'love' as the intended meaning. On the other hand, the reader also knows about the incidents narrated in 14.5-9 involving a lion and honey. Did the Philistines mean a literal lion and literal honey because Samson's wife told them about the incident in 14.5-9? The contextual clues intended to clarify the answer to the riddle ultimately obscure the Philistines' meaning.

Verses 18b-20 provide little help in this dilemma. In 14.18b, Samson replies, 'If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle'. In 14.19-20, Samson kills 30 Philistines in Ashkelon and takes their coats in order to pay the wager. These verses make it clear that Samson thought the Philistines had given him the correct answer to his riddle, but they do not clarify how he interpreted their answer. Did he think they were talking about love, lions, honey, and so on? The reader does not know. Neither Samson nor the narrative ever state what Samson understood as the answer to his riddle. The reader is never told what Samson said to his wife (see 14.17). This gap is all the more apparent when compared to 16.17. Here again, Samson reveals secret information to his lover (in this case Delilah), but, unlike 14.17, the narrated discourse is followed by direct discourse. The reader is told exactly what Samson said to Delilah. While 14.17 should reassure the reader of the correctness of the Philistines' answer, when compared to 16.17, the gap reinforces the fact that the reader is ignorant of Samson's understanding or the Philistines' intention. The gap returns the reader to the theme of secrecy and ignorance and selectivity in revealed information. Again, while attempting to clarify the riddle, the surrounding narrative obscures the riddle.

The obscuring effects of the narrative erode the reader's confidence in any authoritative interpretation of the narrative (be it from the characters, the reader, or even the narrative itself). The narrative resists closure or

24. See Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, p. 187. The narrative highlights the irony of the fate of Samson's wife through heavy vocabulary parallels between 14.15aβ (וַיִּשְׂרֹפוּ אוֹתָהּ וְאֶת-אִבְיָהָ בָאֵשׁ) and 15.6bβ (פֶּן-נִשְׂרֹף אוֹתָךְ וְאֶת-בֵּית אֲבִיךָ בָאֵשׁ).

easy acts of completion. Narrative obscurity and instability cause the riddle to remain open and continually invite further consideration.

3. *The Riddle's Multivalent Quality*

The narrative surrounding the riddle in Judges 14 calls into question the supposed answer it provides. Thus, the reader must respond to the riddle by exploring different possible meanings along various interpretive trajectories. In the following sections, I will explore how the surrounding narrative's ambiguity allows the reader to uncover latent themes within the Samson story as he or she examines a variety of possible interpretations of this multivalent riddle. While not all the interpretations considered below satisfy or address every interpretive issue in 14.14 and 18, they will demonstrate how certain elements of these verses can draw the reader's attention to such latent themes.

a. *A Lion and Honey*

As Olson notes, 'The answer to the riddle, on the surface, is Samson's dead lion with its sweet honey, about which the guests know nothing'.²⁵ A 'surface' reading of the riddle understands the Philistines' speech in 14.18 as a rhetorical question. Nothing is as sweet as honey or as strong as a lion, so honey and a lion are the solutions to the riddle. This solution has much to commend it. The reader is well aware of the earlier episode involving Samson, a lion, and honey (14.5-9). The Philistines' words may draw the reader's attention back to this episode and suggest that this episode is what Samson had in mind when he was formulating his riddle. The reader's attention is further drawn to the 'lion and honey incident' through the alliteration of the letter מ throughout both 14.14 and 18a.²⁶ The מ in 14.14 recalls a use of the מ as the preposition 'from' in 14.9 and reminds the reader of the secret Samson concealed from his parents involving honey and a lion: 'But [Samson] did not tell them that from the carcass of a lion he scraped the honey' (ולא־הגיד להם כי מגיית האריה) (רדה הרבש).²⁷

25. D. Olson, 'Judges', in *NIB*, II, pp. 721-888 (850).

26. Chenshaw, 'Wisdom', p. 243.

27. See Camp and Fontaine, 'The Words of the Wise and their Riddles', p. 139. Camp and Fontaine argue that this connection limits the reader's thinking about the riddle's solution just as the wedding feast context has limited the Philistine's thinking about the riddle's solution.

Ancient Near Eastern evidence also supports this answer. Soggin claims that the motif of 'eaters' is a 'well-known genre throughout the ancient Near East'.²⁸ He cites a Ugaritic text which mentions 'mythical "eaters"' ('aklm') and the fact that 'in Arabic 'akil is one of the many epithets for the lion'.²⁹ This evidence would suggest that Samson had in mind the lion that he killed earlier when he formulated the first part of his riddle in 14.14. In 14.14a β , Samson says, 'from something strong comes forth something sweet'. Again, this line may refer to the honey that Samson found in the carcass of the lion (14.9). There are ancient Near Eastern connections between honey and qualities associated with strength (courage, rejuvenation, and so on). Boling cites a text in which honey is to be mixed with milk and other components to ward off a sickness-producing devil and one in which honey is an ingredient in an offering as part of the preparation for battle.³⁰ Samson may have played on this cultural connection between honey and strength when he formulated his riddle.

b. *Love*

While 'a lion and honey' is a very plausible solution to the riddle, as Samson never explicitly states what he understands as the solution, there are other possibilities that he or the Philistines could have intended. As seen above, several scholars have argued that the Philistines are reciting a popular proverb in Judg. 14.18a, the answer to which is 'love'. Exum writes,

Why does Samson reveal his secrets to a woman? His riddle offers the key. The answer to it (14.14) is another riddle (14.18), whose answer is 'love', whatever other sexual meaning can be found in it. Love is Samson's weak point, his Achilles' heel. The story expresses the male's fear of surrendering to a woman.³¹

Exum's comments are of particular interest for this project. The majority of those scholars considered above, who see love as the proper solution to Samson's riddle, intend their solution to settle a rather unsettling tension in the narrative. Exum, however, presents her solution not simply as a

28. Soggin, *Judges*, p. 241.

29. Soggin, *Judges*, p. 241.

30. R. Boling, *Judges* (AB, 7; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), p. 230. Boling also cites 1 Sam. 14.24-30 to emphasize the strengthening qualities of honey. 1 Sam. 14.24-30 tells a story in which honey is a source of strength and revival for Jonathan (Boling, *Judges*, p. 230).

31. J.C. Exum, 'Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?', in G. Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 65-90 (81).

closure device or an act of completion but as a key that allows further investigation of a more complex theme which she believes runs throughout the Samson story.³² Olson's comments on the riddle also invite the reader to see the riddle as a means of exploring some broader themes within the story:

The answer to the riddle, on the surface, is Samson's dead lion with its sweet honey, about which the guests know nothing... There may be more than this surface-level meaning to the riddle, however, in the context of the larger Samson story. The solution is given in the form of two questions. The interrogatives invite further searching on the reader's part to consider another level of meaning as to what might be stronger than a lion and sweeter than honey... Love is both incredibly strong and incredibly sweet for both Samson and his women, but more significantly for God and the people of Israel. God's powerful and sweet love cannot let Israel go, no matter how disobedient they are.³³

Olson's comments demonstrate that even the answer 'love' resists unambiguous interpretation. Is this love the love of Samson, the love of Philistine women, the love of God, and so on? The answer 'love' may yield substantive exegetical results for this project because it does not necessarily close the riddle, but can preserve the tension in the relationship between the narrative and the riddle. The reader must ask how various types of love (erotic, familial, divine, altruistic, and so on)³⁴ exhibit strength (towards self-destruction, compassion, loyalty, dishonesty, irresistible urges, responsibility or irresponsibility, pleasure, to name a few) over various characters (leaders, lovers, family members, and so forth). By providing the answer 'love', the riddle focuses the reader's attention on the complex theme of 'love' throughout the Samson story.

c. *Samson*

The reader may easily connect the question 'What is stronger than a lion?' with the incident in 14.5-9. Thus, if one does not read the question rhet-

32. Nel, who argues that the answer is love (see above), also uses the answer 'love' as an avenue into the Samson story, claiming that 'the truth of Samson's riddle (i.e. the irresistibility of love)' is materialized throughout the Samson story (Nel, 'The Riddle of Samson', p. 544).

33. Olson, 'Judges', p. 850.

34. Camp, who also argues for a multivalent interpretation of Samson's riddle, questions Nel's proposal that 'love' is the univocal answer and notes that one should distinguish between 'love' and 'sex' and explore the narrative's mediation on their relationship. See Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy*, pp. 130-31.

orically, one obvious answer would be 'Samson'. The reader knows that Samson was certainly stronger than a lion in 14.5. Immediately following the Philistines' question (and in many ways provoked by it), Samson begins to execute a series of terrible vendettas against the Philistines which run through to Judges 16. The Philistines' seemingly rhetorical question in 14.18 is full of dramatic irony because they will soon discover who is stronger than a lion.

As noted above, while the eater (הַאֵכֵל) in 14.14 appears to be the lion in light of 14.5-9, the only characters who do any eating in the surrounding narrative are Samson and his parents (אֵכֵל is used twice in reference to Samson and his parents in 14.9). Likewise, the motif of strength is most often associated with Samson, not the lion, throughout the Samson story.³⁵ As the strong Samson eats the honey and then gives some to his parents, Samson himself could be understood as an eater who provides something to eat or as a strong one who provides something sweet. Is this the answer he told his wife in 14.17? If the Philistines were told of the incident in 14.5-9, their reply in 14.18 could suggest Samson and his honey as the answers to the riddle. Such an answer would certainly be in keeping with Samson's rash, brazen and boastful personality (consider his statements in 15.16 or 16.20).

The question of Samson's strength surfaces again in Judges 16. Following a series of attacks by Samson, the Philistines have overwhelming evidence that Samson is certainly stronger than a lion. Thus, they ask Delilah to discover the source of Samson's strength. Several scholars have observed the close parallels between the Philistines' request of Samson's wife to provide them with the riddle's answer in 14.15 and their request of Delilah to provide them with the source of Samson's strength in 16.5. In 14.15, the Philistines say to Samson's wife, 'Entice (פְּתִי) your husband so that he will tell us the riddle'. In 16.5, the Philistines say to Delilah, 'Entice (פְּתִי) [Samson] and see what makes his strength great'.³⁶ After several defeats at the amazingly strong hands of Samson, the Philistines

35. While the word for strength in 14.14 and 18 (עֹז) is different than the word for strength in Judg. 16 (כֹּחַ), these two words are used together in similar if not parallel contexts at several points throughout the Hebrew Bible (see Gen. 49.3; Lev. 26.19, 20; 1 Sam. 2.9, 10; Job 26.2; Isa. 49.4, 5; Dan. 8.5-7, 22, 23, and so on). Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that they have a good deal of semantic overlap in Judg. 14 and 16.

36. On this parallel see Exum, 'Aspects of Symmetry and Balance', p. 5. In both cases, Samson finally tells his secret to the respective woman 'because she nagged him' (הִצִּיקָהּ in 14.17 and כִּי־הִצִּיקָהּ לוֹ in 16.16).

return to a riddle or secret that centers around strength. In this sense, the Philistines are continuing to work out the implications of the riddle posed to them in 14.14. What are Samson's strengths and weaknesses? What are his passions, his loyalties, his talents, and so on? What internal and external pressures (personal, political, social, cultural, religious, and so forth) shape him? If one sees the answer to Samson's riddle as Samson himself and interprets the riddle along this trajectory, this interpretation could help the reader develop some sense of Samson's character and, like the Philistines, encourage the reader to further explore the complexities of his personality.

d. *Knowledge*

Thinking along thematic lines, another possible answer is 'knowledge' or 'wisdom'.³⁷ I have already explored the important role that knowledge or the lack thereof plays throughout the Samson story. The narrative as well as the various characters are constantly seeking, revealing, and concealing various pieces of information from one another. A lack of knowledge or information eventually plays an important part in Samson's downfall in Judges 16. In 16.20, after Samson's hair is cut, he wakes ready to fight the Philistines but is captured because 'he did not know that the Lord had departed from him'. As stressed above, none of the characters in the Samson story have a complete grasp on all the dynamics involved in their situation. Thus, many of the characters succeed or fail because they act on limited knowledge or, indeed, with no knowledge. As the repeated use of נִסֵּי in Judges 14 signals, what one tells, is told, does not tell, or is not told is of paramount importance for one's survival throughout the story. Knowledge, which is crucial for solving any riddle, may very well be the strongest force in the Samson story (stronger than a lion, Samson, the Philistines, and so on). The possession of knowledge and the ability to discern one's situation rightly could also be compared to the sweetness of honey.³⁸ The

37. Based on the narrative's style, Camp and Fontaine conclude that the narrator 'can only be a member of the Israelite wisdom tradition' (Camp and Fontaine, 'The Words of the Wise and their Riddles', p. 149).

38. The imagery of 'honey' appears in the context of wisdom in Prov. 16.23-24: 'The heart of the wise causes their mouth to be prudent and adds learning upon their lips. Pleasant words are a honey-comb, sweet to the soul and health to the bones' (לֵב חָכָם יִשְׁכִּיל פִּיהוּ וְעַל-שִׁפְתָיו יִסִּיף לֶקַח צוּף-דֶּבֶשׁ אֲמַרְיֵנָעִם מִתּוֹק לְנֶפֶשׁ וּמִרְפָּא לְעֶצֶם). The repetition of vocabulary associated with the human person (mouth, lips, bones, soul) suggests that v. 23 and v. 24 should be read together. This connection between

Philistines' questions turn the reader's attention to how the theme of knowledge plays a part in the development of the Samson story.

4. (In)Conclusion

Unlike the characters, the reader's context is shaped by the themes, motifs, plots, and characterizations in the narrative that surrounds the riddle. The reader does not encounter Samson's riddle independently of this context. Thus, I have explored the need for a greater sensitivity to the complex relationship between Samson's riddle and the surrounding narrative in order to balance the tendency to interpret the riddle along form-critical lines. The tensions within this relationship encourage a richer reading of the Samson story by inviting the reader to pay closer attention to its many different themes, characterizations, and so forth. To be sure, I have not given a full analysis of the themes or characters in the Samson story nor claimed to exhaust the possible solutions to Samson's riddle present in the story. I have only briefly sketched out various solutions to show that the surrounding narrative obscures the riddle's meaning and resists any attempt by the reader to locate an unambiguous solution and perform a final act of completion.

honey and wisdom is even more explicit in Prov. 24.13-14. 'Eat honey, my child, because it is good, and flowing honey is sweet upon your palate. Know that wisdom is thus to your soul' (אכל-בני דבש כִּי־טוֹב וּנְפֶת מִתּוֹק עַל־חֶכֶךְ בֶּן דַּעַה חֲכָמָה לְנַפְשְׁךָ). The Philistines' question, 'what is sweeter than honey?', may remind the reader of other (popular?) proverbs such as Prov. 16.24 and 24.13. Elsewhere, Camp reads these proverbs in connection with Samson's riddle and argues for 'language' such as wise speech, as a possible answer to Samson's riddle. See Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy*, pp. 135-38.