

THE SAMSON STORY AS BORDER FICTION

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The Fictionality of Borders

Many years ago, the television show *Candid Camera* staged a practical joke in which it set up a mock Canadian border post along a California highway.¹ If what was broadcast was representative of what actually happened, a number of motorists were persuaded that they had somehow taken a wrong turn; some, not having their passports, even complied with the Mountie's request to turn around, despite the fact that the real Canada was hundreds of miles away and, in some cases, in the opposite direction. I cite this admittedly unscientific experiment as a way of illustrating a fundamental characteristic of borders: their fictionality. By describing borders in this way, my point is not that all borders are false or illusory but that they are inventions, legal fictions, reflecting not some external fact in the world but what people believe about the world.² The real Canadian border is made manifest in more or less the same way the *Candid Camera* border was. If it seems like a "fact on the ground," that is because a plurality of people accept it as fact, and even then, the governments of Canada and the United States must invest considerable resources to cultivate and sustain this perception, constructing signs, regulating cross-border traffic, punishing violaters.³

It takes even more effort to sustain America's border with Mexico, a boundary transgressed every month by tens of thousands

¹ The following is a revised version of a paper delivered at the annual meeting of ASOR (November 15-18, 2000).

² H. Donnan and T. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 24.

³ My comments here draw on symbolic anthropology, which treats borders as symbolic, cognitive and discursive projections onto a territorial plane (a notion rooted in the idea of the community itself as an imagined construction). See Donnan and Wilson, *Borders*, p. 24, and the various studies included in A. Cohen, *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and Diversity in British Cultures* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

of people who have ties linking them to the US much stronger than whatever legal or physical barriers lie between them.⁴ Maintaining that border not only demands fences and border patrols; it also depends on "border narratives"—stories, rumors, anecdotes that function like urban legends to dramatize the dangers of going to a certain place or engaging in a certain kinds of interaction. Raised in Los Angeles, I recall many stories about Tijuana, that unruly border town inhabited by seductive prostitutes, who promised easy sex but delivered venereal disease, and by voracious thieves on the prowl to steal Gringo cars, or worse, their organs.⁵ This sort of story, which associates the act of crossing the border with legal, sexual and bodily violation may say much more about American fears of pollution and loss of control than it does about the real border with Mexico, but it also has an impact on that border, rendering it a little less porous by casting border-crossing as illicit or dangerous. Other kinds of "border narratives" work for the opposite effect, seeking to render the US-Mexican border more porous by accentuating its artificiality or celebrating cross-border relationships.⁶

In this essay, I want to explore the role of storytelling in sustaining the border between the kingdom of Judah and the Philistines in the "borderlands" of the northern shephelah. We have to be a bit careful with our terminology. Borders in the ancient Near East were quite different from the borders of the modern nation state, rarely manifesting themselves as a formal boundary line dividing up two territories but by a (frequently contested) claim to the various points of access between one community and another—what Mario Liverani calls "gateways" that control communication, trade and movement between states or communities.⁷

⁴ The US-Mexican border is the most thoroughly studied border in the world and has become something of a paradigm case. See O. Martinez, *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994).

⁵ For the stereotyped image of the US-Mexican border as a place of illicit sex and seedy corruption, see Donnan and Wilson, *Borders*, pp. 93-104.

⁶ For more on the role of narratives in constructing (or subverting) borders, see R. Castronovo, "Compromised Narratives Along the Border: the Mason-Dixon Line, Resistance, and Hegemony," in S. Michaelsen and D. Johnson (eds.), *Border Theory: the Limits of Cultural Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 195-220.

⁷ M. Liverani, *Prestige and Interest: International Relations in the Near East ca. 1600-1100 B.C.E.* (Padua: Sargon, 1990), p. 87. As Liverani notes, even in highly

The shephelah throughout the Iron Age (at least to the end of the eighth century BCE when Assyrian conquest redefined conditions there) is perhaps closer to what we mean by the term "frontier," a liminal zone where the gateways between people were relatively open, if they were there at all.⁸ The various peoples living there—Philistines, Canaanites, and Israelites—seem to have interacted in ways that criss-cross the border that supposedly lay between them.

This at least is the impression one gets from the available archaeological and textual evidence. The presence of Philistine pottery at sites like Beth Shemesh and Tel Batash (identified with biblical Timnah) in the early Iron Age suggests a certain degree of interaction and exchange between the inhabitants of these towns (presumably Israelites) and the Philistines.⁹ A similar picture emerges from biblical stories about the Judahite-Philistine frontier in the early days of Israelite history in the land.¹⁰ Samson crosses easily into Philistine territory where he falls for a Philistine woman (Judg. 14:1). Later in the story, we find Samson in the Philistine city of Gath to visit a prostitute (Judg. 16:1), a behavior, incidentally, that is typical of border regions in many cultures where border-crossing is perceived as a way to escape the sexual constraints of one's own culture.¹¹ Other biblical narratives also suggest a certain porousness in the border between Judah and the Philistines, with members of each side able to cross over and

settled areas, where precise definition of land ownership was necessary, borders were not viewed as a line delimiting surfaces but "as a watershed of inhabited sites toward one or another catchment, centered on one or the other place" (p. 89).

⁸ The terms "border" and "frontier" are defined in multiple ways in the scholarship. For the confusion of these terms in biblical studies, see J. Rogerson, "Frontiers and Borders in the Old Testament," in E. Ball (ed.), *Search of True Wisdom: Essays in Old Testament Interpretation in Honour of Ronald E. Clements* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 116-26. My sense of these phenomena more or less follows the definitions of Donnan and T. Wilson (*Borders*, p. 48). They define the frontier as a zone of transition between states; the border, as a boundary separating them.

⁹ See L. Stager, *Ashkelon Discovered: From Canaanites and Israelites to Romans and Moslems* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1991), pp. 17-18; A. Mazar, "The Northern Shephelah in the Iron Age: Some Issues in Biblical History and Archaeology," in M. Coogan, J.C. Exum and L. Stager (eds.), *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor Of Philip J. King* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 247-67.

¹⁰ A point made in the studies cited in the previous note. Note also D. MacKay, "Samson and the Anthropology of Ethnicity" (unpublished paper presented at the annual ASOR meeting in November, 1992).

¹¹ Donnan and Wilson, *Borders*, pp. 91-96.

form allegiances with the other side with little apparent difficulty. To escape Saul, David flees into Philistine territory where he allies himself with Achish of Gath (1 Sam. 27–28:2), and lest one think that border-crossing was unidirectional, when David returns to Judah, he brings with him six hundred loyal Gittites (2 Sam. 15:18–22). Even if we reject the David narrative as a credible historical source, it is nonetheless telling that its author can so easily conceive of Judahites taking up with Philistines and vice versa.

In addition to sexual “transgressions” and political side switching, there was also some apparent religious border crossing going on as well. According to 2 Samuel 6, the Philistines deposited five golden “tumors” and five golden mice in the Ark of the Covenant as a “guilt offering to the Lord” (2 Sam. 6:4, 17–18). Later, before David resettled the ark in Jerusalem, he left it for three months at the house of Obed-Edom, a Gittite who may have been among those following David when he left Gath to return to Judah (2 Sam. 6:10–11). It would appear from these stories that some Philistines so closely identified with the Judahites that they joined in their cultic practices. Yadin suggested something similar happening on a larger scale when he proposed that Samson’s tribe, Dan, was originally a Sea People who, though originally from the Aegean world like the Philistines, soon adapted an Israelite identity.¹²

Such evidence raises the possibility that the Israelites and the Philistines were not quite as distinct as we usually think of them. Of course, many biblical stories portray the Philistines as enemies of Judah (one need only think of David and Goliath), but one should not take this antagonism for granted. Populations living on opposite sides of border often share, or come to share, more in common than remote capitals want them to believe. If nothing else, the mere fact that they live close to one another tends to encourage interaction and cooperation. A typical example of this sort of in-between population is none other than Delilah, Samson’s famous paramour. Contrary to what people often remember about the Samson story, Delilah is not identified as a Philistine; her ethnic affiliation is left ambiguous by the biblical text, which only tells us that she was from the Sorek valley (Judg. 16:4). Whatever her

¹² Y. Yadin, “And Dan, Why did He Remain with the Ships?” *AJBA* 1 (1968): pp. 9–23. For a recent attempt to revive this hypothesis, see Mazar, “Northern Shephelah.”

identity, Philistine, Israelite, Canaanite or something in between, what is interesting here for our purposes is her flexible allegiance: she forms the most intimate of bonds with Samson, but then allies with the Philistines when it proves profitable to do so (Judg. 16:6). Without wishing to suggest that Delilah is a historical figure, I would propose her as a metaphor for the ambivalence of those living in the border region of the shephelah, their potential to ally themselves with one side or the other as their interests dictate.

The ambivalence of border populations can be a problem for states seeking to control their perimeter. As the Berlin Wall shows, states can sometimes resort to drastic measures to insure their control of border regions, using the threat of violence to obstruct the formation of cross-border allegiances and forcibly resettling populations of questionable loyalties. An instructive case is Peter Sahlins' history of the French-Spanish border in the Pyrenees from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.¹³ The inhabitants of this region shifted their allegiances between France and Spain, and sometimes asserted their own local interests over any national identity, posing a serious threat to state-building that both states felt they had to overcome. The French and the Spanish states repeatedly intruded into the region, sometimes violently, before they finally consolidated it as a national boundary. Something similar is likely to have occurred along many ancient Near Eastern "borders" which, as Liverani observes, depended for their definition on the political and cultural orientation of those living there rather than on some clearly demarcated line in the ground or natural barrier.¹⁴ Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that the kingdom of Judah had difficulties controlling the loyalties of the population living along its frontier with Philistia. Such a population could be recruited by the Philistines against Judah as Delilah is recruited against Samson. It could also assert its own local interests against that of Jerusalem, a remote political capital, relatively speaking. The Hebrew Bible attests one local uprising against Jerusalem in this region at the border-town of Libnah which revolted during the reign of Jehoram (2 Kgs 8:22).

¹³ P. Sahlins, *Boundaries: the Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). For other ways in which states seek to control what happens on their borders (inspections, etc.), see Donnan and Wilson, *Borders*, pp. 107-27.

¹⁴ Cf. Liverani, *Prestige and Interest*, pp. 87-105.

If we assume that the kingdom of Judah did indeed have some difficulty controlling the allegiance of its border population in the shephelah, by what means did it prevent that population from switching sides to the Philistines as Delilah is imagined to have done? We may have evidence for one way of restricting Israelite Philistine interaction reflected in the Samson narrative. The Samson saga has been described by Lawrence Stager as a "border epic," reflecting in the stories that it tells about Samson's cross-border meanderings and sexual transgressions the ethnic ambiguities of the shephelah.¹⁵ Building on this idea, I argue in what follows that the Samson narrative does not merely reflect these ambiguities but seeks to assert control over them, doing so, I believe, to delegitimize Philistine claims to this region and stigmatize border-crossing. What we may have in the Samson story, in other words, is an attempt to construct a border, one that relies on the resources of story-telling to redefine the shephelah as social space, clarify the allegiances of the population living there, and impose Judahite hegemony.

Settling Frontiers and Solving Riddles

That the Samson narrative has an interest in geography is clear from the etiologies it supplies for various locales along the border between Judah and the Philistines. The most intriguing story is the one in which Samson slays a thousand Philistines with a jawbone, the latter detail explaining the name of that place, Ramath-lehi, "Hill of the Jawbone" (Judg. 15:14-17). This etiology may be directly relevant to our subject since, according to one scholar, the name Lehi, cognate with an Akkadian word for cheek (*litu* or *letu*) used to describe city limits and other kinds of boundaries, may have originally referred not to a specific place but to the border between Judah and the Philistines.¹⁶ Of course, such etiologies may be secondary to the original story, but a link to the shephelah is inherent in Samson himself; his name is related to the border town of Beth Shemesh, and he was buried "between Zorah and Eshtaol," precisely where this town was located.¹⁷ One

¹⁵ Stager, *Ashkelon Revealed*, p. 18.

¹⁶ M. Lubetski, "Lehi" in D. Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 274-75.

¹⁷ For analyses of the Samson story that make an attempt to distinguish between the original story and later editorial insertions, see Y. Zakovitch, *The Life*

of the basic motives for telling the Samson story, it would seem, was the desire to impose an Israelite meaning on the liminal zone between Judah and Philistia.

Beyond the etymological connections between the Samson story and the shephelah, the two appear to share other characteristics, as well. Unsettled or frontier regions often seem to inspire mythological or literary characters that share their marginality and unruliness. The forests of England, described by James I as "nurseries and receptacles of thieves, rogues and beggars," were notoriously resistant to royal control, a trait reproduced in Robin Hood, the famous rogue given to killing the king's deer and harassing his wardens. In a similar way, the unsettledness and unruliness of the American frontier seems reflected in the legends told of Jesse James and other itinerant anti-heroes of the Wild West.¹⁸ It is as if the heroes associated with these regions absorbed the properties of the frontier: lawlessness, unsettledness, resistance to external control. Biblical scholars have identified a similar correlation between the shephelah and Samson, another hero who refuses to be confined to settled life, flourishes in the in-between or remote spaces and resists any and all attempts to confine him.

Instead of focusing on these often noted connections to the shephelah, however, I want to turn to an episode that does not seem at first to have any geographical resonance: the story of Samson's riddle in Judges 14. The riddle in question is one posed by Samson to the Philistines of Timnah during his wedding feast: "Out of the eater something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet." This riddle, as commentators routinely observe, is a dirty trick, a conundrum that the Philistines cannot possibly answer

of Samson (Judges 13-16): A Critical-Literary Analysis (Jerusalem: Magness, 1982) [in Hebrew]; Y. Amit, *The Book of Judges: the Art of Editing* (trans. J. Chipman; Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 266-309.

¹⁸ For Samson as an undomesticated, Robin Hood-like figure, see S. Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: the Empowerment of the Weak," *CBQ* 52 (1990): pp. 608-24; G. Mobley, "The Wild Man in the Bible and the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 116 (1997): pp. 217-33. For the link between Robin Hood and the unruliness of the English forest, see P. Stallybrass, "'Drunk with the Cup of Liberty': Robin Hood, the Carnavalesque, and the Rhetoric of Violence in Early Modern England," in N. Armstrong and L. Tennenhouse (eds.), *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 45-76. For the unruliness of the American frontier, see Donnan and Wilson, *Borders*, p. 137. See also Liverani, *Prestige and Interest*, pp. 39-42 for the ancient Near Eastern perception of the periphery as a place of chaos and danger.

since its solution presupposes an experience to which Samson alone has been privy.¹⁹ While on his way to the town of Timnah to take a Philistine bride, Samson encounters a lion that he slays with his bare hands. Later, on a return trip to Timnah, he comes across the carcass of the lion again, now flowing with honey from a beehive within it. It is this experience to which Samson refers in his riddle: the lion is the "eater"; the honey, the "something to eat."

What does the story of Samson's riddle have to do with the border region of the shephelah? For one thing, the riddle plays a catalytic role in Samson's conflict with the Philistines. Before Samson tells it, he and the Philistines are headed toward hybridization; after all, the occasion for the riddle is Samson's marriage with a Philistine woman. In the wake of the riddle, Samson and the Philistines become bitter foes: the Philistines have to cheat to solve the riddle; and Samson retaliates by slaying thirty Philistines in Ashkelon and stealing their garments, setting off a violent cycle

¹⁹ The form of both the riddle itself and the Philistines' answer is puzzling. Samson does not phrase his riddle as a question but rather as a declarative statement whereas the Philistines' answer is phrased as a question: "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" (Judg. 14:18). H. Gunkel (*Reden und Aufsätze* [Göttingen: Dandenhoed and Ruprecht, 1913], p. 54) was the first to suggest that the Philistines' response was originally a riddle in its own right with the solution of "love" or "desire." The riddle's original significance was then obscured when it was reframed within the story of Samson's riddle. See also H. Müller, "Der Begriff 'Rätsel' im Alten Testament," *VT* 20 (1970), pp. 467-68; J. Crenshaw, *Samson: a Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), p. 116; P. Nel, "The Riddle of Samson," *Bib* 66 (1985), pp. 534-45; and note A. Yadin's unpublished paper "Samson's קָרָה (I am grateful to Dr. Yadin for sharing a draft of this paper with me).

I find entirely plausible the hypothesis that the riddle and the Philistines' answer existed in an independent form prior to their insertion within the Samson narrative. What is important here, however, is the meaning imposed on these textual fossils by the surrounding narrative. The author/editor of that narrative evidently wished his readers to conclude that Samson's riddle was not meant to be decipherable in the way a normal riddle was. When the Philistines do finally "solve" the riddle, Samson instantly recognizes that his bride has betrayed him ("If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle"). This is something that he could have deduced *only if he knew that there was no other way to solve the riddle* (say, by the Philistines figuring it out on their own, or by his parents revealing the answer). The preceding narrative is in fact careful to establish this point, noting in vv. 6, 9 and 16 that Samson was alone when he had the experience to which the riddle refers (hence making it impossible to solve like a conventional riddle) and that he did not reveal the answer to his parents (ruling them out as informants). Whatever the riddle's original solution, in other words, it is not meant to be solvable in its present literary setting; and indeed, this insolubility is central to what happens in the ensuing story.

of revenge that culminates in mutual destruction. The riddle story is worth examining in the context of our discussion if only because it was perceived by the narrative's author as the turning point in Israel's relation to the Philistines.

What makes this episode even more intriguing for our purposes is the fact that riddles and other linguistic enigmas play a suspiciously similar role in the stories that another Mediterranean culture told about its frontier regions. In a recent study of Greek mythology, Carol Dougherty observes that, in many Greek foundation stories, the settlers in the narrative cannot colonize alien territory until they solve a riddle or demonstrate their mastery of linguistic ambiguity in some other way.²⁰ In one variant of this tradition, the settlers must first decode the enigmatic language of the Delphic oracle, often associated with riddlesome speech, in order to locate the place assigned to them by the gods. In a myth preserved by Plutarch (*Moralia* 294 e-f), for instance, Locrus is told that he will know where to establish a colony when he is bitten by a "wooden dog," a prediction that puzzles the settlers until Locrus steps on a "dog briar" that "bites" him. What makes settlement possible in this sort of story is the settlers' ability to uncover a hidden pun in the oracle that connects an unfamiliar place to a familiar word.

In another kind of story, the ability to manipulate linguistic ambiguity helps the settlers in their confrontation with the native inhabitants of a land. Leucippus of Sparta and his followers were told to settle a colony wherever they could stay "a day and a night" after landing. Arriving at Callipolis, Leucippus persuaded the natives there to allow him to stay for "a day and a night," thus seeming to fulfill the prophesy, but the Spartans had still to persuade the natives to allow them to stay permanently. To do that, they seized on an ambiguity in the expression "a day and a night" which, lacking the definite article, can also mean simply "day and night." When, after a few days, the natives reminded Leucippus that he was only given permission to stay for a little while, he seizes on this ambiguity, arguing that according to their agreement, he and his people could stay so long as it was "day or night", that is, forever. In a story referred to in the *Aeneid* 1.367-8, the Phoenecian queen Dido acquired the territory of Byrsa, site of Car-

²⁰ C. Dougherty, *The Poetics of Colonization: From City to Text in Ancient Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

thage, through a similar ruse. Initially, she asks the Numidian king Hiarbas for permission to buy as much land as an oxhide would cover, but when the king agrees, she cuts the oxhide into a strip that can circumscribe an area of twenty-two stades, exploiting an alternative meaning of the word, "tenere" which means "to cover" but can also denote "to circumscribe."²¹ Riddle-like punning plays a different role in these latter two narratives than it does in the Locrus myth; there the settlers' ability to decode the enigmatic speech of the oracle reveals where they should locate their colony; here the settlers introduce a pun of their own to trick the natives out of their land. In both cases, however, the colonizers' mastery of linguistic ambiguity is what gives them control over frontier regions that are unsettled or controlled by others.

It may not be a coincidence that these myths bear a certain resemblance to the story of Samson's riddle. Indeed, the latter is often compared to a story of a Greek riddle contest involving two legendary seers: Calchas, who participated in the Trojan War, and Mopsus, the grandson of the famed seer Tiresius and the hero responsible for driving the last of the Carians out of Colophon.²² In one version of the contest, Calchus asks Mopsus, "I am amazed in my heart at all these figs on this wild fig tree, small though it is. Can you tell me the number?"²³ In another version, attributed to Hesiod, Mopsus is asked how many pigs were being carried by

²¹ For analysis of this story, see J. Scheid, and J. Svenbro, "Byrsa. La ruse d'Élissa et la fondation de Carthage," *Annales* 40 (1985), pp. 328-42. I thank L. Stager for calling my attention to this story.

²² Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.27. For other Greek parallels with the Samson story, see O. Margalith, "Samson's Foxes," *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 224-29; O. Margalith, "Samson's Riddle and Samson's Magic Locks," *VT* 36 (1986), pp. 225-34; O. Margalith, "More Samson Legends," *VT* 36 (1986), pp. 397-405; O. Margalith, "The Legends of Samson/Heracles," *VT* 37 (1987), pp. 63-70. It is generally assumed that these parallels reflect Philistine/Mycenean influence (recall Yadin's hypothesis that Samson's tribe, Dan, was itself a Sea People from the Aegean world), but it must be admitted that we simply do not know when or how these motifs reached Palestine.

²³ Mopsus' answer to the first riddle connects this myth to other Greek colonizing tales: "They are ten thousand in number, and their measure is a "medimnus" (a unit of measure for grain) but there is one over which you cannot put in the measure." The word "medimnus" recalls another Greek colonizing myth that explains the origin of Thurii. Apollo tells the settlers in this story to found a colony where they will be able to "drink water in measure, eat bread without measure." The colonists realize what the oracle is referring to when they arrive at a spring called "Medimnos" where they can indeed drink water "in measure" (Diodorus 12.10.5).

a pregnant sow. As is often the case in Greek colonization tales, these riddles appear impossible to solve, just as the Philistines have no chance of solving Samson's riddle with its private referent. The resemblance between the Mopsus myth and the Samson story is so pronounced, in fact, that some scholars suspect an historical connection between them, either direct influence of one story on the other or indirect influence through some lost intermediary. There is evidence that the figure of Mopsus traversed the distance between the Aegean world and the land of Samson, surfacing at Asia Minor in the eighth century BCE where the Karatepe Inscription mentions a "House of Mopsus," and even making it to Ashkelon according to the Lydian historian Xanthus.²⁴ It is not inconceivable, therefore, that myths like Mopsus' riddle contest reached the Levant early enough to have influenced the formulation of the Samson story, a process rendered that much more plausible by the fact that the subject of both the Mopsus myth and the Samson story is precisely the encounter of peoples from different cultures.

What interests me about this and other Greek riddle stories, however, is not the possibility of a historical connection with the Samson story but the instructive link they make between linguistic ambiguity and the ambiguities of the frontier. Dougherty's approach to Greek riddle myths is modelled on a classic study of the anthropology of riddles by Ian Hamnett.²⁵ According to Hamnett, riddles are a way of testing and ultimately reinforcing the way in which people organize reality, first conflating separate categories of experience through linguistic ambiguity, then putting them back in place through the solving of the riddle. Hamnett cites as an example none other than Samson's riddle which appears to fuse the opposed categories of eater and eaten, strong and sweet. To solve this or any other riddle is to put things back in order, to re-assimilate the paradoxical or confusing reality described by the riddle back into the familiar, ordered world of everyday existence. Hamnett suggests that this is why many cultures use the riddle to address novel or foreign experiences: "New or alien ideas or institutions appear [by means of riddles] to be re-classified through

²⁴ See R. Barnett, "Mopsus," *JHS* 68 (1953), pp. 140-43. For the passage from Xanthus associating Mopsus with Ashkelon, see F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*, (Leiden: Brill, 1958), number 765, fragment 17.

²⁵ I. Hamnett, "Ambiguity, Classification and Change: the Function of Riddles," *Man* 2 (1967), pp. 379-92.

a transformation that brings them into relationship with familiar experience or traditional knowledge."²⁶

This aspect of riddling gives it something in common with the act of colonization. For the Greeks, the founding of a colony involved imposing a Greek sense of order on foreign soil: defining the borders of the city, marking out the precincts of the gods, erecting walls between city, and country and other acts that organized brute, undifferentiated experience into its proper categories and hierarchies. This process is mirrored in the act of solving riddles. Aristotle, in *Poetics* 22.1458a 26-27, claimed that the essence of a riddle is "to combine things which are impossibly true." In the light of this definition, Dougherty argues that Greek myth turned the frontier into a riddle by imagining it as a place populated by "wooded dogs" and other impossible combinations that fuse flora and fauna, the Greek and the foreign, or other categories kept separate in the familiar world of settled life. The Greeks' ability to solve these riddles shows their power to penetrate and control the ambiguities of unsettled territory: to sort out conflated categories, right inverted relationships, translate the strange into the familiar. For this reason, Dougherty argues, riddle solving became a metaphor for the colonization process, the trope by which Greeks conceptualized their ability to master the frontier and reframe it within their own cultural categories.

Applied to Samson's narrative, Dougherty's approach suggests an analogy between the category confusions of Samson's riddle and the shephelah, another frontier region fraught with ethnic and cultural ambiguity. As we have seen, Samson himself embodies the potential for hybridization endemic to this region, roaming the liminal territory between the categories of Israelite and Philistine. Indeed, these are not only different categories; according to the narrative, they are incompatible opposites. Before Samson sets off for Timnah, his parents plead with him: "Is there not a woman among the daughter of your kinsman, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" (Judg. 14:3). The epithet "uncircumcized" here establishes the Philistines as what a structuralist with a sense of humor might call the unmarked member of a binary pair, circumcision marking its opposite. Samson's journey into Philistine territory and his marriage with a Philistine woman threatens to erase this distinction,

²⁶ Hamnett, "Ambiguity," p. 388.

to combine things which are "impossibly true" according to the segregationist perspective of the narrative's author. The category confusion generated by Samson's behavior is mirrored by the riddle which collapses the distinct categories of nature, the eater and the eaten, the strong and the sweet, just as his border-crossing collapses the boundary between Israelite and Philistine.

All this is a way of suggesting that the story of Samson's riddle is a way of thinking about the ethnic hybridization of the shephelah, its resistance to clear boundaries that keep things separate. But what precisely is this story saying about this region? Even if we assume some historical link with Greek myth, the Samson narrative is not a tale about the settlement of the frontier. If anything, it is what I would call an unsettlement story, meant to explain how the Philistines lost control of the land and its inhabitants. At the beginning of the story, the Philistines dominate Israel, but their power begins to unravel thanks to Samson. First, they find their control of the countryside challenged when Samson burns their vineyards and olive groves (Judg. 15:4-5). Then he assaults the boundaries of Philistine civic space by single-handedly uprooting and relocating the gate of the city of Gaza (Judg. 16:1-3), and just when the Philistines seem about to reassert their control, Samson destroys their temple, striking at the symbolic and social core of their world (Judg. 23-30).²⁷ Each act of violence reaches deeper and deeper into the Philistines' settled existence, from fields to gate to temple, progressively undoing the civic and religious order they have imposed on the countryside. The Samson narrative moves in the opposite direction of Greek myth, where order extends outward from the cities and sacred precincts into the disordered and unruly frontier.

The Philistines' diminishing control over their environment is first suggested by their inability to solve Samson's riddle. It is true that the riddle would have been hard for anyone to decode, but we have seen that Greek heroes like Mopsus were also faced with impossible riddles and yet managed to come up with an answer, in Mopsus' case by divination. Against this backdrop, Samson's riddle exposes an intellectual shortcoming in the Philistines, an inability to sort out the category confluences that confront them in the shephelah. By failing to set aright the impossible reality described by the riddle, a topsy-turvy world where eaters are eaten,

²⁷ Cf. Niditch, "Samson," pp. 614-15; Mobley, "Wild Man," pp. 31-32.

the Philistines reveal that they have not quite mastered the ambiguities of the world around them.

Now it is true that the Philistines do eventually solve Samson's riddle through a rather crude act of cunning:

On the fourth day they said to Samson's wife, "Coax your husband to explain the riddle to us, or we will burn you and your father's house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us?" So Samson's wife wept before him, saying, "You hate me; you do not really love me. You have asked a riddle of my people, but you have not explained it to me." He said to her, "Look, I have not told my father or my mother. Why should I tell you?" She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted; and because she nagged him, on the seventh day he told her. Then she explained the riddle to her people. The men of the town said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down. "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" And he said to them, "If you had not ploughed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle." (Judg. 14:15-18)

Samson appears to accept the Philistines' answer as correct, paying them the garments he promised them as part of their bet, but he clearly does not regard their victory as legitimate, accusing the Philistines of "plowing with his heffer" (Judg. 14:18), and then cheating them in turn by stealing the garments he owes from other Philistines down in Ashkelon (Judg. 14:19).

Nothing like this happens in Greek myth, where the settlers, however much they might stretch the rules of meaning, never go so far as to engage in outright cheating, not even when faced with impossible riddles as Mopsus was. This is a crucial point, because one of the messages conveyed by this kind of story was that Greek colonization of other lands is a legitimate, law-abiding process. Even in stories where the settlers seem to dupe natives out of their property, they always do so legally, within the context of an agreement or contest accepted by both parties. This is why the natives have no cause for retaliation; they had consented to the rules of the game by which they had lost the land. Rather than legitimizing their dominant status, on the other hand, the Philistines' "solution" to Samson's riddle has the effect of calling that status into question, the Philistines prevailing only by breaking an implicit rule of any riddle contest: one is supposed to figure out the riddle oneself, not ask someone who knows the answer. Whereas the riddle-solving of Greek myth celebrates that culture's ability to impose itself on the natives who live there in a law-abiding way that even the natives must acknowledge as legitimate, Samson's riddle story conveys the opposite message, discrediting the Philistine victory as fraudulent and giving Samson a passable excuse to

reject their claim on his property as illegitimate. If we take the Philistines "victory" over Samson as a kind of metonymy for their domination of Israel, just as the story of Dido's defeat of Hiarbas encapsulate the Phoenician settlement of Carthage in a single act of linguistic cunning or Mopsus' solution of Chachas' riddle symbolizes the Greek dispossession of the Carians in Colophon, the way they win calls into question the legitimacy of that domination by rooting it in a deceptive violation of the rules of fair exchange.

Unsettling the Philistines

If there is anything to these suggestions, the Samson story does exactly the opposite of what Greek settlement tales were composed to do. The latter seeks to legitimize encroachment into the frontier by representing the Greeks as the people best able to master its ambiguities. By contrast, the Samson story seeks to delegitimize another people's expansion into the frontier by exposing its inability to master its ambiguities. Is this difference a coincidence? I am inclined to believe not. After all, the Philistines brought with them into the shephelah other Aegeanized behaviors (distinct cooking and dietary habits, their own architectural traditions, even perhaps their own marriage customs) through which they extended the order of the settled world they had come from into the wild and woolly hinterland of Palestine.²⁸ Is it not conceivable that they brought stories with them as well, especially those whose very purpose was to process the settlement of the frontier? If there is anything to this suggestion, what we may have in the Samson story is a counter-colonizing tale that seeks to contest Philistine control

²⁸ For the Aegean origins of the Philistines, see T. Dothan, "Tel Miqne-Ekron: the Aegean Affinities of the Sea Peoples' (Philistines') Settlement in Canaan in Iron I," in S. Gitin (ed.), *Recent Excavations in Israel: a View to the West: Reports on Kibri, Nami, Miqne-Ekron, Dor and Ashkelon* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1995), pp. 41-59; L. Stager, "The Impact of the Sea Peoples in Canaan (1185-1050 B.C.E.)," in T. Levy (ed.), *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (New York: Facts on File, 1995), pp. 332-48. One distinctive dietary practice that evidently distinguished the Philistines from the Israelites/Canaanites they encountered was their consumption of pig meat, which the inhabitants of places like Beth Shemesh avoided in Iron I. See B. Hesse, "Animal Use at Tel Miqne-Ekron in the Bronze Age and Iron Age," *BASOR* 264 (1986), pp. 17-27; B. Hesse with E. Brown, "From Village to State: Changes in the Economy at Beth Shemesh" (paper presented at the annual meeting of ASOR, 2000). Other practices brought with them from the Aegean world include the use of hearths in public buildings and, if A. Yadin is correct, certain marriage customs as well.

over the shephelah by inverting the sort of story used to legitimize that control.

One weakness in this proposal is that we cannot date the Samson story. While Stager implies that it was formulated in the early Iron Age, others have placed its composition as late as the Persian period, and the text itself betrays no linguistic or literary traits that might resolve the debate once and for all. Without being able to date the story precisely, I would nevertheless venture to suggest that it does reflect the *longue durée* of Judah's contest with the Philistines for control of the shephelah frontier, especially prior to Assyria's conquest of the shephelah in the late eighth century BCE. Assyrian conquest gave the upper hand back to the Philistines by destroying numerous Judahite sites in the region like Beth Shemesh, but in preceding centuries Judah seems to have been prevailing in its struggle with Philistia for this region, as shown by the buildup of Beth Shemesh in this period compared with the diminishing fortunes of the most important Philistine city nearby, Tel-Miqne-Ekron which shrunk from 50 to 10 acres at the beginning of the first millennium.²⁹ The Samson story, or some earlier form of it, can be placed very plausibly into this period as an attempt to establish a linguistic control over the shephelah consonant with Judah's efforts to impose military and economic control. The various etymologies and etiologies of the Samson story serve this effort by planting Judahite meaning in the border zone at places like Lehi and the Sorek valley, yet another point of connection with Greek colonization stories which also use etymology to insert Greek meaning into foreign places.³⁰ The story of Samson's riddle serves the goal of linguistic colonization less directly by mocking the Philistines' riddle-solving abilities, perhaps part of their claim

²⁹ I depend for this observation of Drs Z. Lederman and S. Bunimovitz, directors of the current excavations of Tel Beth Shemesh. Assyrian conquest seems to have reversed the fortunes of Beth Shemesh and Tel-Miqne (identified with biblical Ekron). In the seventh century BCE, the former lay desolate (resettlement having been blocked deliberately by the sealing of its mainwater storage system), while the latter experienced renewed growth. For an overview of Ekron's history, see T. Dothan and S. Gitin, "Ekron," in D.N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 415-22.

³⁰ Note, for example, that in addition to explaining how Dido came into possession of Byrsa, the Carthage foundation myth invests the name "Byrsa," probably reflecting the Aramaic word for "fortress" (*birta*), with a Greek meaning through a pun on the similar sounding word for "oxhide." The result of Dido's linguistic acumen, then, is to assimilate a foreign name into Greek culture by giving it a Greek meaning.

to linguistic hegemony if indeed they told riddle stories similar to the ones their Greek cousins used to legitimize the dispossession of native populations. Challenging the Philistine reputation for linguistic mastery in advance of episodes in which the Judean god imposes His own linguistic order on the shephelah, the story of Samson's riddle can be seen as paving the way for Judah's semiotic expansion into this region.

While there is no way to corroborate this contextualization of the Samson story, there is something to be gained from taking it seriously. If border formation in the shephelah worked as it has in other frontier zones with ambivalent inhabitants, it is likely to have depended on discursive practices nearly impossible to observe through archaeological evidence like stereotyping and stigmatizing. One of our best chances to recover these practices as they relate to the shephelah lies in the Samson narrative, a story hard to relate to any real person or period to be sure but valuable nonetheless for understanding the anthropology of border-making in ancient Judah. What I have tried to suggest here, in fact, is that there may be as much to learn about border formation from the *fictionality* of the Samson story, its use of puns and riddles, the patterns that give shape to its plot, its possible mimicry of the other side's story-telling traditions, as there is from investigating whether or not it reflects historical reality, noting as we have that borders are themselves a kind of fiction crafted through the way people imagine space.

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the role of story-telling in constructing Judah's border with the Philistines in the shephelah. Judah's struggle to control this frontier involved overcoming social pressures and incentives that naturally pulled Israelites and Philistines living in it toward integration and hybridization. The Samson story, the most famous biblical narrative associated with the shephelah, offers us an opportunity to reconstruct a possible role for story-telling in counteracting this pressure. Drawing on parallels with Greek myth, I argue that the Samson narrative does not merely reflect the ethnic and cultural ambiguities of the shephelah but seeks to assert control over them, doing so in ways that delegitimize Philistine claims to this region and stigmatize border-crossing. What we have in the Samson story, in other words, is an attempt to impose a fictional border between Judah and the Philistines in the shephelah, a border no less inhibitive for being imaginary.