

Evil Looms: Delilah—Weaver of Wicked Wiles

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Abstract: In this essay, I argue that weaving functions as more than a literary flourish in Judges 16 in that it reflects widespread androcentric cultural stereotypes concerning female sexuality, deception, and entrapment. I further posit that these associations find linguistic support in the tale's sustained and often clever engagement with the language of weaving. Taken in its entirety, the concatenation of weaving imagery and vocabulary evokes said stereotypes to enhance the story's erotic and foreboding atmosphere.

Key Words: Delilah • Samson • weave • sexuality • deception • entrapment • mimesis

O, what a tangled web we weave,
when first we practice to deceive!

—Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion* VI xvii 343

DELILAH HAS LONG STOOD as a classic example of a *femme fatale*.¹ Her cunning manipulation of Samson's affection eventually leads to the loss of his strength and his eyes, and his imprisonment and suicide-killing in the name of vengeance. Though retold in countless artworks, plays, songs, operas, and films, the biblical story comprises a mere eighteen verses (Judg 16:4-22). Despite its brevity,

¹ See, e.g., J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (JSOTSup 215; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Danna Nolan Fewell, "Judges," in *Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; expanded ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 73-83.

scholars long have appreciated its literary sophistication,² farcical nature,³ and cohesiveness, both internally and within the larger cycle of Samson episodes.⁴ Also recognized have been the tale's similarities to ancient Near Eastern and Greek myths.⁵ The wide variety of approaches to the story has resulted in an equally diverse array of interpretations.⁶

In this essay, I should like to focus on a feature of the tale that, to my mind, has not received adequate attention—the significance of weaving. In particular, I contend that weaving functions as more than a literary flourish in that it reflects

² Stanislav Segert, "Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative in Judges XIII–XVI," *VT* 34 (1984) 454–61; Robert Alter, "Samson without Folklore," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (ed. Susan Niditch; SBLSS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 47–56.

³ J. Cheryl Exum and J. William Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner; JSOTSup 92; Sheffield: Almond, 1990) 117–59, here 135; Melissa A. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 116–41.

⁴ Thus James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1973); idem, "The Samson Saga: Filial Devotion or Erotic Attachment?," *ZAW* 86 (1974) 470–504; S. Bar-Efrat, "Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative," *VT* 30 (1980) 154–73; J. Cheryl Exum, "Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga," *JSOT* 19 (1981) 3–29; eadem, "Harvesting the Biblical Narrator's Scanty Plot of Ground: A Holistic Approach to Judges 16.4–22," in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg* (ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997) 39–46; Jichan Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993); Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges* (VTSup 63; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 203–28; Yaira Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (BIS 38; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 266–307; Gregory T. K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* (VTSup 111; Leiden: Brill, 2005); Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Marian Broida, "Closure in Samson," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 10 (2012) 2–34; Elie Assis, "The Structure and Meaning of the Samson Narratives (Jud. 13–16)," in *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson* (ed. Erik Eynikel and Tobias Nicklas; Themes in Biblical Narrative; Jewish and Christian Traditions 17; Leiden: Brill, 2014) 1–12.

⁵ See C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges, with Introduction and Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings* (1918; repr., Library of Biblical Studies; New York: Ktav, 1970) 391–409; Othniel Margalith, "Samson's Foxes," *VT* 35 (1985) 224–29; idem, "Samson's Riddle and Samson's Magic Locks," *VT* 36 (1986) 225–34; idem, "More Samson Legends," *VT* 36 (1986) 397–405; idem, "The Legend of Samson/Heracles," *VT* 37 (1987) 63–70; Gregory Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East* (LHBOTS 453; New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

⁶ See, e.g., Mieke Bal and Christine van Boheemen, "The Rhetoric of Subjectivity," *Poetics Today* 5 (1984) 337–76; Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (CSHJ; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 224–27; Susan Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak," *CBQ* 52 (1990) 608–24; Carol Smith, "Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?," *JSOT* 76 (1997) 45–57; Steve Weitzman, "The Samson Story as Border Fiction," *BibInt* 10 (2002) 158–74; Kenneth M. Craig Jr., "Judges in Recent Research," *CurBR* 1 (2003) 159–85; Bruce Herzberg, "Samson's Moment of Truth," *BibInt* 18 (2010) 226–50; J. Cheryl Exum, "The Many Faces of Samson," in *Samson* (ed. Eynikel and Nicklas), 13–31.

widespread androcentric cultural stereotypes concerning female sexuality, deception, and entrapment. Moreover, I posit that these associations find linguistic support in the tale's sustained and often clever engagement with the language of weaving. Taken in its entirety, the concatenation of weaving imagery and vocabulary evokes said stereotypes to enhance the story's erotic and dangerous atmosphere.

I divide the investigation into three sections. In the first, I survey a variety of Near Eastern and Mediterranean traditions that associate weaving with female sexuality, deception, and entrapment. In the second, I examine the role that weaving plays in the story of Delilah and discuss the story's linguistic prowess with the language of weaving. In the third section, I offer concluding observations on what attention to the significance of weaving contributes to our understanding of the pericope and the larger Samson cycle.

I. Weaving, Female Sexuality, Deception, and Entrapment

For as the Phaeacian men are skilled above all
others in speeding a swift ship upon the sea,
so are the women cunning workers at the loom,
for Athena has given to them above all others
skill in beautiful handiwork, and a good heart.

—Homer *Od.* 7.107-11 (Murray, LCL adapted)

Throughout the ancient world, weaving was primarily a woman's task.⁷ Domestic weaving was so intimately connected with women that the loom, distaff, and especially the spindle, symbolized femininity. In Sumerian culture, when a girl was born, a spindle and comb were placed at her side.⁸ Akkadian texts associate

⁷ See Alexander Uchtel, "Women at Work: Weavers of Lagash and Spinners of San Luis Gonzaga," in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*, part 1, *The Role of Women in the Society of Ebla* (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002) 621-31; Marie-Louise Nosch, Henriette Koefoed, and Eva Andersson Strand, eds., *Textile Production and Consumption in the Ancient Near East: Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Iconography* (Ancient Textiles Series 12; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013). Weaving also was done domestically primarily by women in Egypt, as numerous artistic and mythological depictions attest. Herodotus's statement (*Hist.* 2.35) that weaving was done by men in Egypt runs contrary to most of the artistic and textual evidence. There is some evidence of men engaged in weaving, but only in the New Kingdom. See Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (OTS 49; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 408-9. Men are connected to weaving in the *Teaching of Khety* (P.Sallier 2, col. 7, lines 2-4), also known as *The Satire on the Trades*. Here the text states: *bin sw r st hmt* ("he [the weaver] is worse off than a woman").

⁸ M. Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*, with a chapter by F. A. M. Wiggermann (Cuneiform Monographs 14; Groningen: Styx, 2000) 63.

the spindle (*pilakku*) only with women, goddesses, and female demons.⁹ In Hittite dream rituals, the patient holds a spindle and distaff symbolizing the feminine side, but he receives a bow and arrows after passing through a magical gate, which represents the reacquisition of his virility.¹⁰ In the Ugaritic corpus, it is the goddess Asherah, wife of the chief god El and likely patron goddess of weavers,¹¹ who handles *plkh b ydh plk t'lt bymnh*, "her spindle in her hand, the spindle of the charm in her right hand" (CTU 1.4 ii 3-4).¹² An eighth-century B.C.E. Phoenician inscription from Karatepe describes the safety that the king bestowed upon the city as marked by women carrying their spindles freely on the streets.¹³ The biblical Book of Proverbs (31:19) identifies a distaff and spindle with the famous "woman of valor."¹⁴ In the Greek world, too, it is mainly women who work looms, and thus the tools of weaving, such as the loom and spindle, are highly gendered objects.¹⁵ In addition, in Greek culture a tuft of wool was used to mark the birth of a girl,¹⁶ and the patron goddess of weaving was Athena.¹⁷

The spindle was identified with womanhood to such a degree that, when one associated it with a man, it constituted a charge of effeminacy. Thus, Esarhaddon's curse in a vassal treaty: [*kī ša* ^{GIŠ}*pilaqqi*] *lušašbirūkunu* [*kī sinništū* (sal) *ina maḥar na*] *krukunu* (igi lú.kúr-kunu) *lipašūkunu*, "[As (with) a spindle] may they cause you to be pinned down. May they treat you [like a woman in the presence] of your

⁹ CAD P:372, s.v. *pilakku*. On the comb and spindle in connection with Lamaštu, see F. A. M. Wiggermann, "Lamastu, Daughter of Anu, a Profile," in Stol, *Birth in Babylonia*, 217-52, here 220.

¹⁰ Alice Mouton, *Rêves hittites: Contribution à une histoire et une anthropologie du rêve en Anatolie ancienne* (CHANE 28; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 7. Putting a spindle and distaff in a man's hand dishonored him. See Jaan Puhvel, *Hittite Etymological Dictionary*, vol. 3, *Words Beginning with H* (Trends in Linguistics, Documentation 5; Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991) 342. Cf. CAD S:24, s.v. *saggullu*.

¹¹ See Susan Ackerman, "Asherah, the West Semitic Goddess of Spinning and Weaving?," *JNES* 67 (2008) 1-30.

¹² Asherah's spindle appears to have special performative power. I intend to treat the widespread association of magic and weaving in a separate publication.

¹³ The inscription reads: *בימתי אשת תך לחדי דל פלכם*, "in my days a woman could walk by herself with spindles" (col. 2, lines 5-6). See KAI 1.5:6. Cf. Pliny *Nat.* 28.5, who notes that rural Italian law prohibited women from spinning cloth in the streets, because it was seen as a bad omen.

¹⁴ Occasionally, however, men did produce textiles alongside women. See Exod 35:25-35.

¹⁵ See Evy Johanne Håland, "Athena's Peplos: Weaving as Core Female Activity in Ancient and Modern Greece," *Cosmos* 20 (2004) 155-82. There was, however, a small group of male weaving specialists in Athens. See W. Thompson, "Weaving: A Man's Work," *Classical World* 75 (1982) 217-22.

¹⁶ Jenifer Neils, "Children and Greek Religion," in *Coming of Age in Ancient Greece: Images of Childhood from the Classical Past* (ed. Jenifer Neils and John H. Oakley; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 139-61, here 143.

¹⁷ On Athena, see Martin P. Nilsson, "Die Anfänge der Göttin Athene," *Historisk-filologiske Meddelelser/Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab* 4 (1921) 3-20.

enemy.”¹⁸ David utters a similar curse against Joab for killing Abner: “let it fall upon the head of Joab, and upon all his father’s house; and let there not be cut off from the house of Joab one that has a discharge, or a leper, or one who grasps a spindle [פֶּלֶךְ], or who falls by the sword, or lacks bread” (2 Sam 3:29).¹⁹ In Greek myth, Heracles performs a year of servitude for his mistress Omphale by handling the spindle, doing other chores normally done by women, and by dressing in women’s clothing while she dons his lion’s skin and wields his club.²⁰

Since spinning and weaving represented one of the primary occupations of married women, such activities and the tools required to perform them, became metaphors for, and symbols of, female sexuality. Thus, Sumerian mythological texts refer to Uttu, the goddess of weaving,²¹ as a “voluptuous woman” (munus ni.bulug₃), and her expertise in weaving, as “womanly work” (níg-nam-munus-a), an idiom that also means “sexual skills.”²² Her very name (^dtag.túg) means “weave cloth.” Her liaison with Enki takes place in a garden, which M.-F. Besnier observes is “a place beyond social limits, where deviant behaviors are allowed.”²³ In a song to the goddess Bau for Šu-Suen, the king refers to his mother as ^{gis}gen₆-na túg nam-sag₉-ga-gu₁₀ (“my cloth beam of fair garment”) and his concubine as ^{gis}gen₆-na túg dun-na gál-[la]-gu₁₀ (“my warp beam for weaving”).²⁴ Moreover, the Sumerian term be₅-en-zé-er means both “spider web” and “female pubic hair.”²⁵ In Hittite

¹⁸ D. J. Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon* (Iraq 20.1; London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1958) 75-76 (Ramataia Text, ND 4327, col. viii, 616-17).

¹⁹ M. Malul, “David’s Curse of Joab (2 Sam 3:29) and the Social Significance of *mḥzyq bplk*,” *AO 10* (1992) 46-67. Steven W. Holloway argues that the word פֶּלֶךְ here means “corvée labor,” not “spindle” (“Distaff, Crutch or Chain Gang: The Curse of the House of Joab in 2 Samuel III 29,” *VT* 37 [1987] 370-71); however, the parallel from Esarhaddon’s treaty suggests that we retain the meaning “spindle.”

²⁰ The episode appears in numerous texts and in artistic remains. See Homer *Od.* 11.601-26; Sophocles *Trach.* 69-71; Aeschylus *Ag.* 1035-46; Elmer G. Suhr, “Herakles and Omphale,” *AJA* 57 (1953) 251-63. Margalith discusses the parallel to the Samson story (“Legend of Samson/Heracles,” 63-64).

²¹ On Uttu as the goddess of weaving, see Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) 74; Kramer and John Maier, *Myths of Enki, the Crafty God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 53.

²² See Herman L. J. Vanstiphout, “A Double Entendre Concerning Uttu,” *Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires* (1990, no. 57) 40-44; idem, “Once Again Sex and Weaving,” *Nouvelles assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires* (1990, no. 60) 45-46. The texts in question include *Enki and the World Order* and *Enki and Ninḫursag*. On Uttu as a seductress, see Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994) 30-34.

²³ M.-F. Besnier, “Temptation’s Garden: The Gardener, a Mediator Who Plays an Ambiguous Part,” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Parpola and Whiting), 59-70, here 69.

²⁴ Šu-Suen A, lines 5-6. On the difficulties of this text, see Magnus Widell, “Who’s Who in ‘A Balbale to Bau for Šu-Suen’ (Šu-Suen A),” *JNES* 70 (2011) 289-302.

²⁵ See Miguel Civil, “BE₅/PE-EN-ZÉ-ER = BIŠŠŪRU,” in *If a Man Builds a Joyful House*:

myth, when the god Elkunirša refuses the sexual advances of Ašertu (= Asherah), she threatens to stab him with the very object that represents her sexuality, her spindle.²⁶ Asherah's libido is made clear in the Ugaritic corpus when El assumes that sexual desire led her to his palace: *hm yd il mlk yḥssk aḥbt tr tʿrrk*, "Does the phallus of El the King excite you, the love of the Bull arouse you?" (CTU 1.4 iv 38-39).²⁷ In Athens, female sexuality and weaving came together in the tasks of the Arrhephoria, who were charged with preparing young women for marriage by introducing them to sexuality and the mastery of spinning and weaving.²⁸ The association obtains on a linguistic level as well, since the Greek word συμπλοκή designates both "weaving" and "sexual intercourse" (Plato *Pol.* 281a; *Symp.* 191c).²⁹

In addition to registering femininity and female sexuality, weaving can metaphorically denote deception, manipulation, and sexual entrapment.³⁰ In the Sumerian tale of *Enki and Ninhursag*, the weaving goddess Uttu manipulates the sexual advances of Enki, who already had raped his daughter and her descendants, that is, Uttu's great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother.³¹ Before he approaches Uttu to repeat his unbridled pattern of marriageless, incestuous conquest, her mother instructs her to outtrick the trickster god by requesting of him cucumbers, apples, and grapes (aphrodisiacs) that represent bridal gifts.³² Enki then matches

Assyriological Studies in Honor of Erle Verdun Leichty (ed. Ann K. Guinan et al.; Cuneiform Monographs 31; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 55-61.

²⁶ Harry A. Hoffner, "The Elkunirša Myth Reconsidered," *RHA* 23 (1965) 5-16, esp. 6-8; Gary Beckman, "Elkunirša and Ašertu," in *The Context of Scripture* (ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr.; 3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1997-2003) 1:149-51.

²⁷ Her libido is thus a match for El: *tʿrkm yd ʿl kym wyd ʿl kmdb ʿrk yd ʿl kym wyd ʿl kmdb* "El's phallus lengthens like the sea, his phallus like the flood. El's phallus is as long as the sea, El's phallus, like the flood" (CTU 1.23 33-35).

²⁸ Sarah Iles Johnston, "A New Web for Arachne," in *Antike Mythen: Medien, Transformationen und Konstruktionen* (ed. Christine Walde and Ueli Dill; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009) 1-22, here 14.

²⁹ This is observed by John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric* (trans. Carol Volk; *Revealing Antiquity* 9; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 13, 176 n. 121; LSJ, 1684, s.v. συμπλοκή.

³⁰ The association lived on in early Judaism. Concerning the expression טווה בשוק ("spinning in the street"), *b. Ket.* 72b records: "Rabbi Judah said in the name of Samuel, 'It refers to a woman who shows off her arms to bypassers.' Said Rabbi Hisda in the name of Abimi, 'It refers to a woman who spins (so that the spindle) dangles towards her vulva.' . . . Rabbi bar bar Hannah said, 'Once, I was walking behind Rabbi Uqba. I saw an Arab woman sitting, plying her spindle and spinning (so that the spindle) dangled towards her vulva. When she saw us, she broke off (the thread) and dropped the spindle and said to me, 'Young man, would you fetch me back my spindle?'" See Cynthia M. Baker, *Rebuilding the House of Israel: Architectures of Gender in Jewish Antiquity* (Divinations; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002) 101-2, 209 nn. 50-51.

³¹ Alhena Gadotti, "Why It Was Rape: The Conceptualization of Rape in Sumerian Literature," *JAOS* 129 (2009) 73-82.

³² Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, 30-35. On Enki as a trickster figure, see Kramer and Maier, *Myths of Enki*.

her deception when he returns disguised as a blind gardener.³³ In Greek literature, one of the most famous tales of manipulation and weaving is the account of Penelope, who forestalls her would-be suitors for three years while weaving a burial cloth during the day and unraveling it at night (Homer *Od.* 2.94-110; 19.139-51; 24.139-50). As she reveals to the disguised Odysseus, ἐγὼ δὲ δόλος τολυπεύω ("I wind a skein of wiles," *Od.* 19.137); the term τολυπεύω here means both "wind up thread" and "scheme."³⁴ According to Herodotus, Xerxes' wife Amestris discovered that her husband was unfaithful when she saw his mistress Artaynte wearing a multicolored cloak that she had woven for him (*Hist.* 9.109-12). She then used this discovery to coax him into delivering her true rival into her hands, the mistress's mother. The incident combines erotic passion with weaving and deception.³⁵ Notions of weaving and deception are so close in Greek that a number of technical terms employed for the weaver's work do double duty for "plot," "scheme," "show cunning," and the like. Thus, μήτις ("weaving") means "cunning" (*Od.* 13.386); περοπλέκω denotes "weave, twine around" but also "deceitful speech"; ῥάπτειν ("sew") can mean "plot evil" (*Il.* 18.367; *Od.* 3.118; 16.423); and ὑφαίνω means "weave" or "scheme" (*Il.* 3.212).³⁶ As Evy Håland remarks, "The female speech of weaving is connected with both a female way of handling things and female cunning."³⁷ According to Francesca Santoro L'Hoir, this connection holds for the literature of the ancient Mediterranean generally:

Weaving was metaphorical for sexual entrapment, as is implied in Homer's portrayals of designing enchantresses who move to and fro at their looms. In Roman literature, the loom possesses a similar ambivalence, as is evident in the story of Lucretia, in which the mere sight of the woman spinning incites Sextus Tarquin's lust (Livy 1.57.9).³⁸

It is likely that the association of weaving with entrapment derives, in part, from the identification of weavers with spiders.³⁹ Throughout the ancient world,

³³ Piotr Steinkeller, "A Note on Lines 168-169 of *Enki and Ninhursag*," *JCS* 65 (2013) 69-71.

³⁴ Noted by Marie-Louise Nosch, "Voicing the Loom: Women, Weaving, and Plotting," in *KE-RA-ME-JA: Studies Presented to Cynthia W. Shelmerdine* (ed. Dimitri Nakassis, Joann Gulizio, and Sarah A. James; Prehistory Monographs 46; Philadelphia: INSTAP Academic Press, 2014) 91-101, here 93.

³⁵ The account conforms to a larger pattern in *Histories* involving deception and the manipulation of signs. See Alexander Hollmann, "The Manipulation of Signs in Herodotus' *Histories*," *TAPA* 135 (2005) 279-327, here 287-88.

³⁶ LSJ, 1130, s.v. μήτις; 1415, s.v. πλέκω; 1565, s.v. ῥάπτω; 1906-7, s.v. ὑφαίνω.

³⁷ Håland, "Athena's Peplos," 170.

³⁸ Francesca Santoro L'Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009) 170.

³⁹ Note the Ugaritic root *šrg* ("deceive") (*CTU* 1.17 vi 34-35), whose Hebrew cognate (שרג) means "weave, plait, braid" (e.g., Job 40:17; Lam 1:14). The Semitic root appears unconnected to spiders. The Ugaritic root does not appear in any context in which we might read it as "weave" and the Hebrew root does not appear in a context in which we might understand it to mean "deceive."

the spider was the weaver par excellence. Thus, the Akkadian word for “spider” (*uttūtu/ettūtu*) informs the name of the Sumerian goddess of weaving, Uttu.⁴⁰ In addition, the Sumerian and Akkadian terms for “weave” (*zé-zé* = dun-dun; Akk. *šatū*) also refer to a “spider’s web.”⁴¹ In the Hebrew Bible, the spider (אָרַג, lit., “weaver”) and its web are synonymous with entrapment and hopelessness. Isaiah rebukes liars who “weave the webs of a spider” (וְקוֹרֵי עֵכָבִישׁ יֵאָרְגוּ, 59:5). Their machinations will be to no avail, because “their webs do not become a garment” (קוֹרֵיהֶם לֹא יִהְיוּ לְבָגָד, 59:6).⁴² When Bildad promises Job that “the hope [תְּקוּהָ] of the impious will perish; his confidence will be cut off; his trust is but a spider’s web” (Job 8:14-15), we hear his words as a clever riposte to Job’s lament just prior: “My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle [אָרַג], they go without thread” (Job 7:6-7)—a quip that exploits the polysemy of תְּקוּהָ as “hope” and “thread.”⁴³ The fragility of threads similarly inspires the prayer that Hezekiah utters after recovering from his illness: “I took up like a weaver my life, he cut me off from a loom” (יִבְצַעֲנִי מִדְּלֵה חַיִּי מִדְּלֵה כְּאֶרְגָּה, Isa 38:12). In Greek literature, Democritus suggests that humans learned weaving from spiders.⁴⁴ Homer tells us that Hephaistos wove a net ἡτὺρ ἀράχνης λεπτὰ (“as fine as a spider’s web”) around his bed in order to trap the adulterous couple, Ares and Aphrodite (*Od.* 8.265-317). He also parallels Penelope’s prolonged work at the loom with the work of a spider, when Telemachus comes to check on her chastity and asks “whether my mother endures still in the halls, or whether some other man has married her, and the bed of Odysseus lies forlorn of sleepers with spider webs grown upon it” (*Od.* 16.30-35).⁴⁵ According to Ovid, when Arachne challenged Athena to a weaving contest, her hubris angered Athena so much that she transformed her, like her namesake, into a spider, destined to spin and weave forever (*Metam.* 6.1-145). As Sarah Iles Johnston affirms, “a spider’s web could evoke entrapment and a predatory nature, particularly when a weaker figure used tricks to capture a stronger one—the best known case being Aeschylus’ description of Clytemnestra capturing Agamemnon.”⁴⁶

Also informing the identification of weaving with entrapment is the fact that nets and other types of snares were made of woven or knotted materials. Thus, Bildad likens a “net” (רֶשֶׁת) to a “weaving” (שִׁבְכָה, Job 18:8), and the psalmist observes that one must “lie in wait” (יֵאָרֵב) to use a “net” (רֶשֶׁת, Ps 10:9; cf. Prov

⁴⁰ CAD E:396, s.v. *ettūtu*.

⁴¹ CAD Š/2:217, s.v. *šatū* B. The Akkadian word *qū* (“thread”) also means “spider web”; see CAD Q:287, s.v. *qū* A.

⁴² The Hebrew בגד (“garment”) also means “treachery.” More on this below.

⁴³ I discuss the linguistic one-upmanship in Scott B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism in the Book of Job* (JSOTSup 223; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 52, 132.

⁴⁴ Democritus DK 154 = Plutarch *Soll. an.* 974A6-10.

⁴⁵ The parallel is noted by Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Female Textile Production* (Danvers, MA: Rosemont, 2001) 80-82.

⁴⁶ Johnston, “New Web for Arachne,” 7.

1:17-18). Such connections provide a backdrop for Qohelet's description of a deceptive woman: "the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are bonds" (אִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר לִבָּהּ אֲסוּרִים וְיָדֶיהָ בָּדוֹת, Qoh 7:26). See similarly the portrait of a man who followed an adulterous woman: "like an ox going to the slaughter he goes, like a fool/deer into a snare, until an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird rushing into a trap, and he does not know that it will cost him his life" (כְּשׁוֹר אֲלִיטָבָה יָבוֹא וְכַעֲס אֲלִימוּסֵר אוֹיֵל: עַד יִפְלֹחַ חֵץ כְּבָדוֹ כְּמָהָר צָפוֹר אֲלִיפָה) כשור אליטבה יבוא וכעס אלימוסר אויל: עד יפלוץ חץ כבדו כמהר צפור אליפה" (Prov 7:22).

II. Weaving in the Tale of Samson and Delilah

I did it in a way, and this I cannot deny, that he could not flee or defend against death. I wrapped him in a cloak, like a fishing net, an evil wealth of cloth.

—Aeschylus *Ag.* 1380-83 (adapted from Lewis Campbell, *The Orestia of Aeschylus* [London: Methuen, 1893])

I submit that the widespread association of weaving with female sexuality, deception, and entrapment explains the presence of the theme of weaving in the story of Delilah's seduction of Samson (Judges 16). The loom and the language of weaving charge the narrative with an erotic atmosphere filled with potential for duplicity and foreboding. The integration of weaving at the climax of the Samson cycle appositely magnifies Samson's proclivity for inappropriate women.

Sex, deception, and entrapment seamlessly intertwine in the pericope. In fact, just before we learn of Delilah, the narrator establishes an erotic context by informing us that Samson slept with a prostitute at Gaza (16:1-3).⁴⁷ The juxtaposition encourages us to connect the two figures.⁴⁸ Several linguistic ties support the connection. As James L. Crenshaw observes, the name Delilah echoes the word לילה ("night"), which immediately precedes the pericope twice in a similar context

⁴⁷ On various allusions to sexuality throughout the Samson cycle, see Ludwig Levy, "Sexualsymbolik in der Simsonsage," *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* 3 (1916) 256-71; K. van der Toorn, "Judges XVI 21 in the Light of the Akkadian Sources," *VT* 36 (1986) 248-53; Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero," 617; J. Cheryl Exum, "Samson's Women," in eadem, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993) 61-93, esp. 78-80; Shalom M. Paul, "'Plowing with a Heifer' in Judges 14:18: Tracing a Sexual Euphemism," in *Sacred History, Sacred Literature: Essays on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion in Honor of R. E. Friedman on His Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. Shawna Dolansky; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008) 163-67. For a contrary view, see Serge Frolov, "Sleeping with the Enemy," *CurBR* 11 (2013) 308-27, who argues that scholars are eisegetically imposing sexuality on narratives. Biblical texts, however, often employ euphemisms when referring to sex—we should not usually expect to find explicit references.

⁴⁸ See Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) on Judg 16:4.

involving scheming and ambush (16:2).⁴⁹ The name also recalls the דלתות (“doors”) of the gate that Samson hauled off to Gaza (16:3);⁵⁰ thus, it identifies doors with a promiscuous woman, a vulgarism found in the Bible and elsewhere.⁵¹ When Samson “pulls up” (ויסע) the loom (16:14), we recall the gate that Samson “pulled up” (ויסעם) (16:3).⁵² The fourfold mention of Samson’s “head” (ראש, 16:13, 17, 19, 22) also reminds one of the “summit” (ראש) to which he carried the gates (16:3), and its final appearance in the phrase “hair of his head” (שער־ראשו, 16:22), evokes the שער (“gate”) of the summit (16:2, 3).⁵³ Moreover, the episode involving Gaza’s gates foreshadows Samson’s destruction of the temple at Gaza—in both scenes Samson destroys an architectural structure vital to the city.⁵⁴ Furthermore, both pericopes employ the root ארב (“ambush,” 16:2, 9, 12) and set in motion the theme of treachery.

Sexuality and deception also combine in the encounter with Delilah when the Philistine lords instruct her to פתי אותו, an expression that means both “seduce him” (16:5; cf. Exod 22:16; Judg 14:15) and “deceive him” (cf. Deut 11:16; 2 Sam 3:25).⁵⁵ Though the text never explicitly states that Samson and Delilah had sex,

⁴⁹ Noted by Crenshaw, who observes, “The name Delilah, then, made smooth transition between the two unrelated episodes and continued the erotic mood introduced by the earlier reference to a harlot” (*Samson*, 18–19). O’Connell (*Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 217 n. 310) and Niditch (*Judges*, 164) suggest that the name paronomastically recalls the word for “night.” J. Alberto Soggin suggests that the name possibly plays on “Lilith” (*Judges: A Commentary* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981] 253). It is of interest that images of Lilith in early Judaism depict her with long disheveled hair. See Naama Vilozny, “Lilith’s Hair and Ashmedai’s Horns: Incantation Bowl Imagery in the Light of Talmudic Descriptions,” in *The Archaeology and Material Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (ed. Markham J. Geller; ISJ Studies in Judaica 16; Leiden: Brill, 2015) 133–52.

⁵⁰ Broida also notes a discrepancy in the narrative that encourages readers to think that “the Philistine lords bribed Delilah because they were angry that Samson carried off Gaza’s gate—which would explain Samson’s imprisonment in Gaza” (“Closure in Samson,” 30).

⁵¹ On the use of doors and other openings as suggestive of the womb or vulva, see Job 3:10; Song 5:4–5; 8:9; and Shalom M. Paul, “The Shared Legacy of Sexual Metaphors and Euphemisms in Mesopotamian and Biblical Literature,” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Parpola and Whiting), 489–98, here 498.

⁵² See Amit, *Book of Judges*, 283.

⁵³ The identification obtains on a visual level, especially in the pre-Masoretic text.

⁵⁴ When Samson ויסם (“grasps”) the pillars that bring the temple down (16:29), we paronomastically recall המסכת (“the web,” 16:13). Paronomasia perhaps also ties חברון (“Hebron,” 16:3) to the fresh cords that were never חרבו (“dried,” 16:7–8).

⁵⁵ The scene recalls Samson’s wife, whom the men told to פתי her husband and acquire the answer to the riddle (7:15). Crenshaw asserts that the verb פתה appears elsewhere in the Bible only in reference to men seducing women (“Samson Saga,” 495). There is the case of Job 31:9–10, however, which also bears other points of comparison with the Samson cycle. Nevertheless, perhaps this is another case of gender reversal of the sort discussed by Niditch, “Samson as Culture Hero,” 617. See also Mieke Bal and Christine van Boheemen, “The Rhetoric of Subjectivity,” *Poetics Today* 5 (1984) 337–76, esp. 361.

its euphemisms are clear enough. Indeed, the innuendos were understood readily by the LXX translators.⁵⁶ Thus, Samson's final nap, which takes place when Delilah "put him to sleep upon her knees" (ותישנהו על ברכיה, Judg 16:19), is rendered ἐκοίμισεν αὐτὸν ἀνὰ μέσον τῶν γονάτων αὐτῆς ("she put him to sleep between her knees"), a location made doubly suggestive in that γονάτων ("knees") can mean "groin."⁵⁷ In addition, the verb for "putting to sleep" (from κοιμάω), can refer to sexual intercourse.⁵⁸ The rabbis also believed the couple had sex: "What is (meant by the phrase) 'and she urged him' [16:16]? R. Isaac by the authority of R. Ammi said: 'At the time of the consummation [גמר ביאה], she pulled herself away from beneath him'" (b. Sot. 9b).

The narrative literally ties together themes of female seduction and weaving each time Delilah binds Samson, for binding requires her to tie and knot a cord, skills quite familiar to a weaver. The verb אָסַר ("bind") appears no fewer than twelve times in this brief story, far more than required, and almost always it occurs in reference to cords.⁵⁹ It is not until his strength departs that Samson is bound with "bronze fetters" (נְחֹשֶׁתִּים) and placed in the "prison" (בֵּית הָאֲסוּרִים), 16:21).

Moreover, each time Delilah binds him, the cords are likened to threads of fabric. When Samson snaps the first set of cords (יתרים),⁶⁰ we are told, "and he snapped the cords, like a string of wick is snapped when a fire whiffs it" (וַיִּנָּתֵק וַיִּנָּתֵק פְּתִיל־הַנֶּעֱרַת בְּהִרְיָחוֹ אֵשׁ, 16:9).⁶¹ The word פְּתִיל ("string") appears elsewhere for a thread woven into skilled fabric work (Exod 28:28; 39:3; Num 15:38). The reference also recalls Samson's previous encounter with the Philistines who bound him unsuccessfully: "the cords that were on his arms became

⁵⁶ See Natalio Fernández Marcos, "The Septuagint Reading of the Samson Cycle," in *Samson* (ed. Eynikel and Nicklas), 87-99.

⁵⁷ The term derives from γεννάω ("bear children"; LSJ, 344, s.v. γεννάω). In Hebrew, the term for "knees" also can refer to "genitalia"; see Gen 30:3; 50:23; Job 3:12. Paul also discusses Hebrew and Akkadian examples ("Shared Legacy," 494). See also Stefan Schorch, *Euphemismen in der Hebräischen Bibel* (Orientalia Biblica et Christiana 12; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000) 103.

⁵⁸ LSJ, 967-68, s.v. κοιμάω.

⁵⁹ This totals 12 percent of the ninety-eight uses of the root in the Bible.

⁶⁰ If the cords are bow-strings (cf. Ps 11:2), then they also symbolize male virility. See Gen 49:24; Job 29:20; Harry A. Hoffner, "Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near Eastern Sympathetic Magic Rituals," *JBL* 85 (1966) 327-34, here 327; Paul, "Shared Legacy," 493-94; Sandra Jacobs, "Divine Virility in Priestly Representation: Its Memory and Consummation in Rabbinic Midrash," in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond* (ed. Ovidiu Creangă; Bible in the Modern World 33; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010) 146-70. Yehudah Elitzur astutely sees the cords as having multiple uses (ספר שופטים [Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Quq, 1976] 151). Made from the guts of animals, they served for bows, musical instruments, and ropes.

⁶¹ The verb נתק ("snap") appears elsewhere in reference to חוט ("thread," Qoh 4:12), חבלים ("ropes," Isa 33:20), and יתרים ("tent cords," Jer 10:20).

like flax that burns in the fire, and his bonds melted off his hands” (העבתים אשר) על-זרועותיו כפשתים אשר בערו באש וימסו אסוריו מעל ידיו, Judg 15:14).⁶² In this case, the text also paronomastically connects the “Philistines” (פלשתים) with the “flax” (פשתים) that one weaves into a “string” (פתיל, Ezek 40:3).

The second time Delilah binds Samson it is with עבתים (“ropes,” Judg 16:11), also a woven item (cf. Exod 28:14). The noun derives from a root עבת, which means “to weave” or “to scheme mischief.” Thus, Micah’s censure:

All of them lie in ambush [יארבו] for bloodshed. Each hunts the other with a net [חרם]. Both palms are upon the evil-thing to do it well. The prince asks, and the judge (too) for a bribe; and the great man speaks his desire for calamity. They scheme evil [ייעבתוה]. (Mic 7:2-3)

Inherent in Samson’s reference to new ropes, then, are notions of weaving and plotting. Just like the first set of cords, Samson again “snapped them” (ניתקם) from his arms. This time, however, they are likened to a “thread” (חוט, Judg 16:12), an item again at home near a loom (cf. Josh 2:18; Song 4:3).

In the third binding scene, Delilah weaves seven “locks” (מחלפות) of Samson’s hair, the very symbol of his virility,⁶³ directly into her loom and fastens the loom with a “heddle stick” (יתד, 16:13-14).⁶⁴ In so doing, she literally makes his hair the thread of the fabric, a move that evokes the term דָּלָה (“thread” or “hair,” from דָּלַל),⁶⁵ intrinsic to the name דְּלִילָה, “Delilah.”⁶⁶ In addition, as Stanislav Segert

⁶² The passage also recalls Samson’s burning of the Philistines’ grain fields (15:5), which resulted in the burning of his previous wife and father-in-law (15:6).

⁶³ On hair and male virility in the ancient Near East, see Enkidu and Gilgamesh, Esau (Gen 27:11), Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8), and Absalom (2 Sam 14:26). See Edmund R. Leach, “Magical Hair,” in *Myth and Cosmos: Readings in Mythology and Symbolism* (ed. John Middleton; American Museum Sourcebooks in Anthropology; Garden City, NY: Natural History Press, 1967) 77-108; Niditch, “Samson as Culture Hero,” 616-17.

⁶⁴ The יתד cannot be a mere “peg” or “pin,” since a small item hardly can be expected to secure Samson and the entire loom. This issue clearly bothered the translators of the LXX, who add that Delilah hammered the peg to a wall: “If you weave the seven plaits of my head with the warp and hammer them into the wall with the peg” (Ἐὰν ὑφάνῃς τὰς ἑπτὰ σειρὰς τῆς κεφαλῆς μου μετὰ τοῦ διάσματος καὶ ἐγκρούσῃς ἐν τῷ πασσάλῳ εἰς τὸν τοῖχον, 16:13). See already George Foot Moore, who suggested that it is equivalent to Greek σπάθη (“weaving blade”) (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* [ICC; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895] 353-54).

⁶⁵ Cf. Song 7:6: “Your head upon you is like Carmel/crimson, the strands of your head are like purple, a king is captured by (your) tresses” (ראשך עליך ככרמל ודלת ראשך כארגמן מלך אסור) (ברהטים). Cf. also *P. Harris* 500 2:1: “The cord is my [...?], her hair is the bait in the snare to entrap me” (kr̥p̥ n̥y.w = i [p̥j̥ st?] šnw m w̥y ddf(t).w hr̥ p̥ ph̥ r mrtw). Note that šnw means both “hair” and “net.”

⁶⁶ Thus, *HALOT*, 222, s.v. דְּלִילָה; and J. Gordon Harris posits that it relates to דָּלָה (“loom”) (Harris et al., eds., *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* [NIBCOT 5; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000] 256). There have been various other proposals for the etymology of her name. The rabbis connected her name to דָּלַל (“weaken”) in the sense of “diminish one’s strength by way of sex”: “If she had not

noted, her identification with “Wadi Soreq” (נחל שרק, 16:4) introduces notions of “carding” or “combing,” which precedes the cutting of hair.⁶⁷ See, for example, Isaiah’s prophecy against Egypt: “they will be ashamed, those who work combed flax, who weave white materials” (ובשו עבדי פשתים שריקות וארגים חורי, Isa 19:9). In addition, the term for “locks” (מחלפות), which appears only in this chapter, implies a braiding or pleating,⁶⁸ thus making it also a woven object.⁶⁹ Furthermore, when Delilah’s constant inveigling reaches a fever pitch, the narrator states that “his being was vexed to death” (ותקצר נפשו למות, Judg 16:16). The verb קצר here suggests vexation, but usually it denotes “cutting short,” especially in the sense of cutting grains with a sharp tool (cf. קציר, “harvest”). Thus, as Marian Broida observes, the statement strikes an ominous chord of foreshadowing, for the cutting of his hair will result in cutting short his life.⁷⁰ Moreover, before Samson realizes that his strength has left him, he thinks to himself, “As with the previous time, I will shake (them) this time” (כפעם בפעם ואנער, 16:20). Fittingly, the verb נער can refer metaphorically to the shaking of textiles. For instance, the psalmist describes his adversaries as clothed with a perennial garment of cursing from which he is tossed: “I am shaken off like the locust” (ונערתי כארבה, Ps 109:18-23; cf. Isa 52:2;

been called ‘Delilah,’ it was appropriate that she was so called: Delilah weakened [דילדלה] his strength, she weakened [דילדלה] his heart, and she weakened [דילדלה] his deeds” (b. Sot. 9b). Burney argues that the component *dalil* appears in Akkadian personal names connected with Ishtar, and he concludes: “Delilah must have been a sacred prostitute devoted to the service of the goddess” (*Book of Judges*, 407). Robert G. Boling opines that it relates to the Arabic *dallatum*, “flirtatious” (*Judges: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* [AB 6A; New York: Doubleday, 1975] 248). James A. Montgomery already suggested similarly a connection to the Arabic *dalla*, “make signs, gestures of love, to play the coquette” (“Some Hebrew Etymologies,” *JQR* 25 [1935] 261-69, here 262). See Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (1863; repr., 1968) 3:901, s.v. دَلَّ, <http://www.studyquran.co.uk/LLhome.htm>. Soggin suggests “falling curl” in relation to her hairstyle (*Judges*, 253) See similarly Marc Zvi Brettler, who also entertains the meaning “flirt” (*The Book of Judges* [Old Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 2002] 56). John C. Yoder understands דָּלָל as “hang low,” in the sense of “dishonor” (*Power and Politics in the Book of Judges: Men and Women of Valor* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015] 238 n. 27). For a survey of the etymological suggestions, see Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 127 n. 79. To these proposals I add that the name’s identification with Wadi Soreq (lit. “Wadi of the Red-Vine”), also suggests דָּלָה (“hang low”), said of the foliage of vines (Ezek 17:6; 19:11).

⁶⁷ Segert, “Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative,” 458.

⁶⁸ The root חלף means to “pass through, away, intertwine, exchange.” Men throughout the ancient Near East braided and pleated their hair and beards. See, e.g., the many depictions of men in the Neo-Assyrian reliefs. Cf. the Greek verb διαπλέκω used for “weaving” and “plaiting” one’s hair (LSJ, 407, s.v. διαπλέκω).

⁶⁹ Codex Vaticanus treats the locks as plaited locks, which connects them to the previous cords and ropes. See Niditch, *Judges*, 165 n. w.

⁷⁰ Broida, “Closure in Samson,” 25.

Neh 5:13).⁷¹ The use of this verb in Samson's thoughts effectively makes him a textile from which his ambushers (אַרְבִּים) cannot be shaken.

The story's climax occurs in the fourth episode, when Delilah pressures Samson into thinking that disclosing the secret of his strength would demonstrate his love:

How can you say you love me, your heart is not with me! This third time you have deceived me, and you have not told me in what is your great strength. And then she pressed upon him with her words daily, and she urged him, and his being was vexed to death. (Judg 16:15-16)⁷²

The references to cords, threads, and a loom in the previous three scenes, create an expectation that once again Delilah will employ her weaver's tools to secure Samson. Yet, as Edward Greenstein observes about the cycle, "The narrator constantly plays upon the characters' and the audience's anticipation, reversing the outcomes of their carefully controlled expectations."⁷³ Indeed, this time we hear nothing of cords or ropes. Instead, the only bind that holds him, as Delilah's pleading emphasizes, is his love for her.⁷⁴

The conception of love as a powerful "bond" is well attested in the Hebrew Bible and well beyond.⁷⁵ See, for example, Hosea's "ropes of love" (עֲבֹתֹת אֶהְבֵּהּ),

⁷¹ Segert notes a paronomastic connection between the נָעַר ("wick") and the verb אָנַעַר ("shake off") ("Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative," 457). The allusion connects Samson's previous strength to his current weakness.

⁷² Broida notes that the scene also recalls that of Samson's wife, when she "pressured him" (הִצְקִיתָהוּ) to divulge the secret of the riddle (14:17) ("Closure in Samson," 25).

⁷³ Edward L. Greenstein, "The Riddle of Samson," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981) 237-60, here 243.

⁷⁴ Kim observes "that 'love' was the final and most fatal weapon that Delilah used to defeat Samson as foreshadowed [in] the Philistines' riddle at Samson's wedding" (*Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 328).

⁷⁵ See, e.g., the *qû* ("rope") of Shamash that was placed on the arm of a *nadîtu* as a symbol of her devotion to the god. See *CAD* Q:287, s.v. *qû* A; and Rivka Harris, "The *Nadîtu* Woman," in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim, June 7, 1964* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964) 106-35, here 115. Note, too, the Hebrew terms קָבַל ("bind, knot" or "join, be united with") and קָשַׁר ("tie, knot" or "commit, be in league with"). Paul reminds the disciples at Colossae that love is the "bond [σύνδεσμος] of perfection" (Col 3:14). Pausanias describes a statue of Aphrodite Morpho at Sparta whose fettered feet symbolized a woman's bond (δεσμοίς) of fidelity to her husband (*Descr.* 3.15.10-11). On the binding of sandals and sexuality of feet in the Greek world, see Daniel B. Levine, "Eraton Bama ('Her Lovely Footstep'): The Erotics of Feet in Ancient Greece," in *Body Language in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (ed. Douglas L. Cairns; Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2005) 55-72. Deborah Tarn Steiner understands the chains as an apotropaic effort sympathetically to restrict the goddess's movement and unrestrained sexuality (*Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001] 163). There also is a great deal of evidence from the Near East and Greek world for the use of knots and cords in love magic. See Christopher A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). Of course, many ancient binding rituals, from the use of tefillin to

which tie the young Israel to its sacred vow (Hos 11:4).⁷⁶ Above I commented on the frequent use of the root אָסַר (“bind”) in the tale. I add here that only Numbers 30 employs that root more often, and the Numbers pericope enumerates the laws concerning the אֲסָרִים (“bonds”) and נְדָרִים (“vows”) between a husband and wife.⁷⁷ Moreover, as Jichan Kim observes, the identification of “love” as the means by which Delilah might successfully subdue Samson finds support in the narrative’s structure, which brackets the repeated use of the root אָסַר with reference to Samson’s אָהֶב (“love”).⁷⁸

Now well secured by the bonds of love, Delilah reaches for a tool that cuts. We are not told what implement she used to clip his מַחְלָפִית,⁷⁹ but the “locks” themselves register an ironic tone as they suggest both a מַחְלָף (“knife”) and מַחְלִיף (“transformation”) of Samson’s nature.⁸⁰ From the perspective of the Samson

handfasting, and more recent English expressions, such as “tie the knot” and “the bonds of matrimony,” are vestiges of this concept.

⁷⁶ An allusion to the strength of love appears already in the solution to Samson’s riddle (Judg 14:18). As J. R. Porter notes, Samson’s riddle oddly takes the form of a statement, whereas the friends’ solution appears as a question (“Samson’s Riddle: Judges XIV.14.18,” *JTS* 13 [1962] 106-9, here 106). Exum observes that the solution to Samson’s riddle is another riddle, the answer for which is “love” (“Samson’s Women,” 82). She does not explain this, however. I suggest that the solution finds support in Song 8:6: “love is as strong [עוֹזָה] as death” (cf. “the cords of death” in Ps 18:4-5), and Prov 9:17: “stolen waters” (i.e., illicit love) are “sweet” (יִמְתְּקוּ). Such references allow us to understand why “love” answers the rhetorical query: “What is sweeter [מִתּוֹק] than honey, and what is stronger [עוֹזָה] than a lion?” Moreover, when the riddle is understood in this way, the solution subtly brings into focus a tension already present in the narrative, that Samson desires the Timnahite sexually but does not love her. On reading the Samson cycle as a riddle, see Greenstein, who proposes that one way to understand the text is as an allegory in which Samson represents Israel (“Riddle of Samson,” 237-60). Hermann Gunkel similarly proposed that “love” was the answer to Samson’s riddle to his companions (*Reden und Aufsätze* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913] 38-64, here 54). E. Slotkin suggests that the answer also might be “Samson” (“Response to Professors Fontaine and Camp,” in *Text and Tradition* [ed. Niditch], 153-60, here 157).

⁷⁷ The root appears twenty-three times in Numbers 30, which constitutes 23 percent of all occurrences in the Bible. No other biblical pericope contains more than two instances of the root, with the exception of Judges 15 (six times), also in the Samson cycle. Pericopes using the root twice include Genesis 49 and Job 36. On the root אָסַר as a *Leitwort* in the Samson cycle, see O’Connell, *Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 222.

⁷⁸ Kim, *Structure of the Samson Cycle*, 329.

⁷⁹ Samson refers to the מִרְרָה (“razor”), a tool that appears to be specific to Nazirite ritual (Judg 13:5; 16:17; 1 Sam 1:11). When she removes the locks, however, we are told simply that “she shaved” (תִּלְגָּה) them (Judg 16:19). This is just one of many ambiguities in the narrative. See Smith, “Samson and Delilah,” 48; Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 135-36. Steve Weitzman understands them as a reflection of the ethnic and cultural ambiguities in the borderland of the Shephelah (“Samson Story as Border Fiction,” 158-74).

⁸⁰ Cf. Ezra 1:9; Gen 35:2; Isa 40:31; Job 20:24. On the transformation and feminizing of Samson, see Niditch, “Samson as Culture Hero,” 616-17; Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 133-35.

cycle, the “locks” and the loom also recall the thirty linen garments and thirty “changes of clothing” (חלפת בגדים) that constituted Samson’s wager in Judg 14:12–13 (shortened to חליפות in 14:19)—a phrase that connotes “changing treacheries.”⁸¹ As Robert Boling recognized, with regard to the larger narrative structure of Judges, Samson’s demise recalls the story of Jael, who lured Sisera into her tent and put him to sleep before hammering a tent peg (יתד) through (חלפה) his head (ראש) (5:26; cf. 4:21).⁸² There “he sank, fell, and lay between her legs” (בין רגליה) (5:27),⁸³ while the women of his household attributed his delay to a rich spoil of “embroidered” (רקמה) textiles (5:30).⁸⁴ Therefore, Delilah’s clipping of the hair/thrum identifies her final act as weaver—the cutting of a textile from a loom—with her final acts as a *femme fatale*—the severing of her relationship with the tragic leader and the cutting short of his life.

III. Conclusions

Teos brought you to Greece (Anaceron),
you sweet old weaver of womanly songs.
—Plato *Critias* fr. 8.1–2 (Edmonds, LCL adapted)

Therefore, will I go on more earnestly
to weave the web of my discussion.
—Lucretius *De Rerum Natura* 6.42 (my translation)

I submit that the concantation of so much weaving imagery and vocabulary in such a short narrative draws upon widespread cultural traditions that associate weaving with female sexuality, deception, and entrapment,⁸⁵ and that these

⁸¹ The word כִּנָּדָה means “clothing” or “treachery” (cf. Isa 24:16; Jer 12:1). In the pre-Masoretic text, the phrase could connote “women exchanging treacheries” (reading the noun as the feminine plural participle חִלְפוֹת). Cf. Ugaritic *hlp*, which can mean “cloak” (Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* [trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson; 2 vols.; HO 67; Leiden: Brill, 2003] pt. 1, p. 393, s.v. *hlp*) and “dagger” (*CTU* 1.19 iv 44).

⁸² Boling, *Judges*, 250.

⁸³ Cf. the words of Rabbi Yohanan in *b. Yeb.* 103a (= *b. Naz.* 23b): “That wicked one (Sisera) had sex (with Jael) seven times that day,” which Rashi explains by noting that the verbs כָּרַע, נָפַל, and שָׁכַב appear seven times together in Judg 5:27. See Paul, “Plowing with a Heifer,” 166.

⁸⁴ Note also the end of that tale, in which the narrator asserts, “So all your enemies perished, O Yhwh, and let those who love him [אֹהֲבָיו] go forth like the sun [שֶׁמֶשׁ] in its strength” (5:31). Might this be the redactor’s way of assisting comparisons to the Samson narrative?

⁸⁵ The associations had a long life in the ancient world. In the *Life of Mary of Egypt* (PG 87:3712), Mary works as a weaver to supplement her income gained from prostitution. John Moschos’s *Spiritual Meadow* (PG 87:2912) tells of a virgin who blinds herself with her distaff to stave off would-be suitors attracted to her eyes. Cited by Nicholas P. Constatas, “Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh,” *JECS* 3 (1995) 169–

associations imbue the story with an erotic atmosphere rife with foreboding.⁸⁶ The narrator has triggered these associations by introducing Delilah immediately after Samson's brief visit with the prostitute. Of all the women who play roles in the cycle, none is the object of Samson's love and none is named, except Delilah. Even Samson's mother remains nameless,⁸⁷ despite the fact that she is the angel's point person for delivering information to Manoah (Judg 13:8-9, 12-13). Therefore, the name Delilah demands close attention (16:4). As with other names whose meanings often bear import for the narratives in which they appear,⁸⁸ her name immediately evokes the thrum and the world of the weaver. The sequence of binding episodes, each of which integrates references to threads and the loom, thus achieves by literary device what the process of weaving itself entails—a series of interlocking schemes and binds that reveal the overall skill and design of the weaver. The audience soon realizes that if "a triple-braided cord is not easily snapped [יִתְקַן]" (Qoh 4:12), the bonds of love are impossible to sever.

Given the centrality of weaving to the narrative and the sophisticated manner in which the redactor has crafted it, with its "stair-step" movement from weaker to stronger binds (i.e., cords > ropes > loom > love), it perhaps is worth considering whether the tale also embodies a poetic mimesis of the process of weaving. Classicists have long acknowledged this in a number of Greek and Latin texts, especially those in which weaving plays a central role.⁸⁹ The relationship between weaving and text in Greek and Latin literature is exceptionally close, because in the Aegean world patterns in woven textiles could communicate.⁹⁰ Demonstrating this well are the patterns that Philomena wove into a robe that secretly informed

94, here 186 n. 52. Interestingly, one also finds this idea in Aztec tradition in Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina, the Aztec goddess of spinning, weaving, filth, sin, and sexual misdeeds. See Thelma D. Sullivan, "Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina: The Great Spinner and Weaver," in *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico: A Conference at Dumbarton Oaks, October 22nd and 23rd, 1977* (ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone; Dumbarton Oaks Pre-Columbian Symposia and Colloquia; Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1982) 7-35.

⁸⁶ It thus can be said, with Exum "to show women as powerful and therefore dangerous and, at the same time, to appropriate their power for androcentric purposes" ("Samson's Women," 62).

⁸⁷ See J. Cheryl Exum, "Promise and Fulfillment: Narrative Art in Judges 13," *JBL* 99 (1980) 43-59, here 48.

⁸⁸ For numerous examples, see Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991).

⁸⁹ See Jane McIntosh Snyder, "The Web of Song: Weaving Imagery in Homer and the Lyric Poets," *CJ* 76 (1981) 193-96; Gregory Nagy, *Plato's Rhapsody and Homer's Music: The Poetics of the Panathenaic Festival in Classical Athens* (Hellenic Studies 1; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Barbara Clayton, *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer's Odyssey* (Greek Studies; Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).

⁹⁰ See Martin Steinrück, "La répartition des rites, le *gender* grec des VI^{ème} et V^{ème} siècles et la structure de *marqué—non marqué* européenne au XX^{ème} siècle," in *Les femmes antiques entre sphère privée et sphère publique: Actes du diplôme d'études avancées, Universités de Lausanne et*

Procne that Tereus had raped her (Apollodorus *Library* 3.14.8; cf. Ovid *Metam.* 6.412-674). In Latin, the connection is even etymological: both text and textile derive from *texere* ("weave").

Might such conceptions also inform the production of some ancient Near Eastern texts? Anne Kilmer has drawn attention to a number of compositional patterns in Mesopotamian literary texts that appear to have their origins in the production of textiles, especially texts with ring-structure patterns.⁹¹ Indeed, the Sumerian term *sur* can mean "spin, weave, twist" and also "edit text," and written compositions can be called "twisted threads" (*gu.meš.gil.meš*).⁹² Some Akkadian terms also suggest a conceptual affinity between weaving and the creation of texts, such as *kašāru* ("tie, knot, bind"), which also can mean "compose a text."⁹³ Such a conception appears to have had a long life in the Near East, for Classical Arabic and Persian traditions also identify texts, especially poems, with weaving, and employ the loom as a metaphor for composing.⁹⁴ Might it be that such widespread and long-standing cultural associations inform the composition of the Samson cycle? As a number of scholars have shown, the narrative conforms to a number of well-designed patterns including a ring-structure that ties together chapters 14 and 16.⁹⁵ Perhaps, then, there are two textiles woven in the tale—the treacherous plot that brought Samson to his demise, and the text itself, the yarn, artfully crafted.

Neuchâtel, 2000–2002 (ed. Regula Frei-Stolba, Anne Bielman, and Olivier Bianchi; Echo 2; Bern: P. Lang, 2003) 29–43, here 38; Håland, "Athena's Peplos," 170; Nosch, "Voicing the Loom," 91–101.

⁹¹ Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, "Fugal Features of Atra-Hasis: The Birth Theme," in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout; Cuneiform Monographs 6; Groningen: Styx, 1996) 127–39; eadem, "Weaving Textual Patterns: Symmetry in Akkadian Poetic Texts," paper delivered at the University of California–Santa Barbara, 1999; eadem, "Visualizing Text: Schematic Patterns in Akkadian Poetry," in *If a Man Builds a Joyful House* (ed. Guinan et al.), 209–19.

⁹² See Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 138.

⁹³ *CAD* K:257, s.v. *kašāru*. The verb *maḥāṣu* usually means "smite," but it also can mean "weave" or "play a musical instrument," the connection being the striking of strings. *CAD* M1:71, s.v. *maḥāṣu*.

⁹⁴ On looms as metaphors in Classical Arabic texts, see Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, vol. 3 (trans. Franz Rosenthal; Bollingen Series 43; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967) 375. In Persian, the word *tiraz* (طراز) means "weave" and "compose poetry." See Yedida K. Stillman and Paula Sanders, "tiraz," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (13 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1960–2009) 10:534. Cf. J. Harries, "Pattern and Choice in Berber Weaving and Poetry," in *Forms of Folklore in Africa: Narrative, Poetic, Gnostic, Dramatic* (ed. Bernth Lindfors; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977) 77–187.

⁹⁵ See Exum, "Aspects of Symmetry," 3–29; Kim, *Structure of the Samson*; Broida, "Closure in Samson," 2–34.

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