The Three Sins of Samson the Warrior

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"*La nation est née belliqueuse*" – the nation is born with a warring spirit, reads one of Voltaire's aphorisms in his *Histoire de Charles XII* (History of Charles XII, 1731).[1] While this may not be true of all nations, it certainly applies to ancient Israel, at least according to Julius Wellhausen, the pioneer of biblical criticism who considered the battle camp of this people's warriors to be "the nation's cradle".

> History was the same thing as war. The name of Israel means "El fights", and Yahweh was the fighting El, from whom the people derived their name. The battle camp, the nation's cradle, served as its earliest sanctuary, for it united Israel and Yahweh. In peaceful times, the two were sleeping, but the danger of enemy attack woke them up. Israel's awakening always began with that of Yahweh. God awoke for himself the men who, driven by His spirit, assumed leadership; in them Yahweh embodied his own sovereignty. Yahweh went out to battle with the army as one of the warriors, and in the warriors' frenzy his presence was felt.[2]

The notion of Israel's military origins is supported by the Merenptah stela, an ancient Egyptian inscription dating from ca. 1209 B.C.E. This earliest datable text that mentions Israel refers to it as a people living, it seems, in northern Palestine, as a group to be reckoned with by the Egyptian army.[3] In this military inscription ancient Israel first makes its appearance in history.

The biblical book of Judges, which offers the earliest legendary records we have of Israel, tells the story of the battles that were fought by tribes who first banded together in temporary military alliance to counter either episodic foreign raids or, worse, more permanent foreign domination. Militias formed around local

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[1] Voltaire, Histoire, 396 (book 5).

[2] Wellhausen, Geschichte, 15.

[3] Israel stela of Merneptah, in: Hallo, Context 2, 40-41.

chieftains and their tribes. Overall command in any battle fell to the charismatic leader of the moment. Later, the temporary alliance was made permanent, and the king headed the new organisation – that of the state. While Israel's warriors presumably never doubted the validity of the idea that war gave birth to Israel, rival theories arose and crystallised into definite accounts that eventually were written down. Thus toward the end of the Judean monarchy, in the late seventh century B.C.E., a legend cultivated by priests, scribes, and intellectual leaders of the people emerged as a serious rival to the military myth: the equally legendry notion that Israel originated in a covenant between Yahweh and the people, mediated by Moses and recorded in written documents; these documents also laid down the laws according to which the people were to be ruled. Finally, by about 500 B.C.E., a third contender made its appearance: the theory that Israel's ancestors were peaceful pastoralists more interested in their families and the fertility of their flocks than in either war or books of law.

While it cannot be our task here to arbitrate among these three theories that respectively reflect the mentalities of warriors, intellectuals, and peasants, it is important for scholarship to ponder and try to understand the details of such biblical legends. The present paper seeks to elucidate the meaning of one of the stories told in the book of Judges. It will be argued that the Samson story (Judg 13-16) reveals a major aspect of ancient war ideology – the ambivalent attitude to the warrior as a social type. Our essay will first determine the precise nature of Samson as a warrior, and then study the negative attitude taken in the biblical story toward the warrior's role.

A typology of wild men

The story of Samson is presented as a series of episodes that tell of the hero's life from the announcement of his birth by an angel of Yahweh to his death in a temple of the Philistines, Israel's enemies. The story can be read as a sequence of seven episodes, a number playfully corresponding to the hero's seven locks of hair in which, mysteriously, his physical strength resides.[4] Samson normally prevails over his enemies: he outwits them, seriously injures them, and kills many. In the end, however, Samson falls into the enemy's hands and dies.

In order to understand the Samson cycle, first of all we have to determine the precise nature of Samson as a particular social type. Generally speaking, we might characterise Samson as a wild man – someone who sets himself apart from normal social life and lives according to his own, unpredictable laws. Wild men who fall into this general category are well known, and Hermann Gunkel, who in the early twentieth century famously applied the insights of folklorists to the study of biblical stories, described two types of wild men to illustrate the figure of Samson (though he failed to distinguish the two types clearly).

[4] The seven episodes are: Judg 13; 14; 15:1-17; 15:18-20 (undeveloped episode); 16:1-3 (undeveloped episode); 16:4-22; 16:23-31.

1. According to Gunkel, Samson "the strong man of nature" (*der kraftvolle Naturmensch*) embodies the ideals of the young men of the tribe of Dan.[5] These ideals, he explains, were warlike, and the war the young Danites waged individually was directed against their neighbours, the culturally superior and politically oppressive Philistines. While Gunkel thought of in terms of the feats of individual young men, modern social science has found that acts of violence and crime are typically perpetrated by *youth gangs*.[6] Such gangs of young delinquents, not fully integrated as groups, with fluctuating membership and diffuse leadership, have been studied in modern cities, but they also seem to have existed in one form or another from ancient times. In the book of Proverbs the teacher warns his young students not to heed those who invite them to join their group for engaging in acts of bloodshed and plundering – this is the teacher's very first and apparently very urgent moral advice (Prov 1:11-19).

2. A second type of wild man considered by Gunkel is that which he describes, rather vaguely, as excelling in "strongmanship" (*Kraftmenschentum*). He illustrates this type from a popular tale told among the people of Tur Abdin (eastern Anatolia, Turkey) in the 19th century:[7] as a boy, Yûsif the handsome, a foundling, kills a boy and his father who had called him a whore's child. Knowing that after these murders he could no longer live in the town of his foster parents, he goes off to a cave in the nearby mountains. From there he continues to kill and commit many other crimes. He even manages to break in through the city gates. Soldiers sent out against him have no chance. A love affair with a young woman from the city leads to his capture, and he is thrown into the sea. However, he is then swallowed by a fish in whose belly he not only survives, but also finds his future wife. Once spat out again on the shore, the two marry, their son following his father in leading the life of a bandit. After many adventures, Yûsif finds his true parents, and the story ends with the celebration of a feast. "The tale as such has no particular connection with the Samson story", Gunkel explains. "Men such as Yûsif actually existed until recently in Montenegro [the Black Mountains of Albania]: bold adventurers who by night descended into the Turkish villages to cut the throats of some unbelievers. After the act, they swiftly left to hide in a stronghold in the mountains."[8] "Such examples", Gunkel adds, "teach us that life repeats itself". The *social bandit* (as recent research calls the type characterised by Gunkel) reacts against oppression and exploitation of the peasant population by urban or feudal lords or, more generally, against a ruling class. Originally a peasant, a social bandit opts out of normal working life, retreats to the mountains, the desert, or some other form of wilderness, and from there attacks the oppressors, either alone or together with, or sometimes heading, a band of likeminded men. Around 1900, in Gunkel's generation, social banditry still flourished in the Balkans, where some Christian peasants fled into the mountains from where they

[5] Gunkel, Simson, 42.
[6] Yablonsky, Gang.
[7] Prym / Socin, Sagen, 80-88 (no. 24).
[8] Gunkel, Simson, 42-43.

terrorised the Muslim oppressors whom they despised as "unbelievers". In the Balkans, these bandits were called *hajduks*. Modern anthropological study has interpreted social banditry as a form of political resistance that may develop into large-scale uprising.[9] Social bandits are typically supported by the majority population, and they may acquire fame and become popular heroes. In the biblical world, social bandits were well known. Documents dating from the Bronze Age (2nd millennium B.C.E.) refer to them as Habiru, by modern specialists defined as "fugitives who had left their own states either to live as refugees in other parts of the Near East or outlaws who subsisted as brigands out of reach of the authorities of the states".[10] The word "Hebrew" may be related to, or derived from, Habiru.

Samson shares a few features in common with the two types of wild men described by Gunkel. Yet, neither of them actually fits the Samson figure. Samson is neither presented as the warlike ideal of his tribe (let alone as the leader of a youth gang), nor is he portrayed as a social bandit who, like Robin Hood, robs the rich and befriends the poor (though at least one more recent scholar[11] followed Gunkel in calling Samson a bandit). Yet, Gunkel's project, though flawed, is seemingly not a complete failure. He looked in the right direction, but his analysis failed because his typology of wild men was too sketchy and incomplete. So in order to advance, we have first of all to add a few more items to the list of varieties of the wild man: the adolescent dropout, the novice warrior, and the charismatic warrior.

3. The *adolescent dropout* is a familiar type in ancient Greek myth and folklore. Refusing any normal occupational, marital, or military role, he is a hunter in the wild, given to tricks and deception, with an ambiguous sexual identity that ranges from transvestite to celibate to hypersexual womaniser.[12] In his stage-play *Phaedra*, Euripides portrays Hippolytus as such a figure: a young man bristling with carefree energy who loves horses, hounds and hunting but spurns the hustle and bustle of urban life as well as any association with the female sex.

4. Another type of wild man is the *novice warrior*. In some ancient societies, young men are regularly set apart from the rest of the settled population. With minimal clothing and practically no weapons, they live for a period in the wilderness, spending their time with stealing and presumably also murdering enemies of their tribe or village.[13] "During the entire novitiate, the usual economic and legal ties are modified, sometimes broken altogether. The novices are outside society." As outsiders, they "can steal or pillage at will and adorn themselves at the expense of the community".[14] Such was the case in Sparta. In this Greek city, the education of young men focussed on military skills, and, at the age of eighteen, the young men were not spared hardship during extended periods of training – perhaps as much as a year – during which they apparently had to live in isolation from their

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[9] Hobsbawm, Bandits.

[10] Lemche, Art. Habiru, 7.

[11] Niditch, Samson.

[12] Dodd, Adolescent Initiation, 72, based on Vidal-Naquet, Recipes.

[13] See the survey by Meiser, Indogermanische Jugendbünde.

[14] Gennep, Rites of Passage, 114.

families and rely on theft for their survival. At one point in Spartan history, some of the young men thus trained were made members of the Krypteia, a name that translates as Secret Service Brigade. Plutarch describes this institution as follows:

> From time to time, the magistrates dispatched privately some of the ablest of the young men into the country, armed only with their daggers, and taking a little necessary provision with them. In the daytime, they hid themselves in out-of-the-way places, and there lay close, but, at night, issued out into the highways, and killed all the Helots they could light upon. Sometimes they set upon them by day, as they were at work in the fields, and murdered them.[15]

Armed only with a dagger or knife, the members of the Krypteia had the task of terrorising and killing members of the Helot class, the state slaves of Sparta.[16] We do not know whether the Krypteia members went about their bloody business individually or in small groups. – Among the Germanic tribe of the Chatti, according to the Roman writer Tacitus, each young tribesman went through a period in which he was neither a youth nor a full member of the adult community.[17] During this liminal period, he let his beard and hair grow long and unruly, and, acting as fierce as he looked, harassed the enemy, presumably on his own account. Once he had proved his maturity by killing one of the enemy, he was allowed to shave, cut his hair, and behave like an adult.

5. The *charismatic warrior* starts his career as a novice warrior, but, unlike these, he never rejoins normal society. He continues to be an outsider, an anarchist who as a hero defies the rules of settled life. A description of this social type can be found in Tacitus' report about the Chatti. Some of their novice warriors, apparently the strongest, refrain from joining the adult community but remain as warriors. Their token seems to be an iron ring worn on the index finger as a pledge to kill enemies even in peaceful times, and they do not settle into domestic working life. "None of them has a home or a plot of land or any other mundane concern", explains Tacitus, "they are supported by anyone to whom they come, extravagant with the goods of others, scornful of their own, until enfeebled old age makes them unequal to such a harsh heroism."[18] As long as they are strong, they are used for fighting, and when there is a battle, they form the first rank. While Tacitus does not give us further explanation, his description reveals the warriors' marginal and parasitic position within society. Scholars debate whether these warriors should be considered isolated individuals or as members of formal warrior associations.[19]

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[15] Plutarch, Life of Lycurgus, 28.

[16] For recent discussions of the Spartan "Krypteia", see Cartledge, Education; Welwei, Krypteia; Link, Entstehungsgeschichte.

[17] Tacitus, Germania 31.

[18] Tacitus, Germania 31, as translated by Rives. Some of the details of this passage remain obscure or controversial.

[19] For a recent discussion of the evidence, see Meier, Problem. Meier does not decide whether Germanic warrior clubs actually existed or owe their existence to modern scholarly imagination.

The five types of wild man have much in common, though there are significant differences that prevent us from lumping them together under one single label. To which type does Samson belong? My research has convinced me that the fifth type, the *charismatic warrior*, is the category into which Samson most easily fits.

Samson the charismatic warrior

In the case of Samson, the warrior's charismatic quality is indicated by the title given to this hero in the biblical text: Nazirite. In order to understand what this means, we must turn to an at first sight enigmatic, yet revealing passage in the book of Amos, where the prophet uses the same title that the book of Judges applies to Samson: Nazirite (Judg 13:7). In this passage, the God of Amos declares that, in the early days of Israel, he raised up some young Israelites as prophets and others as Nazirites (Amos 2:11). But the Israelites gave the Nazirites wine to drink and forbade the prophets to speak in the name of God, continues Amos. As a result, the Israelite warriors will be incapable of withstanding their enemies, because:

> Flight shall perish from the swift,
> And the strong shall not retain his strength,
> Nor shall the mighty [or, warrior] save his life.
> He who handles the bow shall not stand,
> And he who is swift of foot
> Shall not save himself,
> Nor shall he who rides the horse save his life;
> And he who is stout of heart among the mighty [or, warriors]
> Shall flee away naked in that day. (Amos 2:14-16)

Why should the people's improper dealing with prophets and Nazirites lead to defeat in battle? What is the relationship between prophets, Nazirites, and warriors? If we define these three figures in relation to war and warfare, the passage no longer seems enigmatic. The prophets Amos refers to must be seen as the spokesmen of the warrior deity; they called for military action and announced victory given by Yahweh. The Israelite warriors were most likely ordinary members of the society who took arms when necessary, for a standing army did not exist. While the identity of the Nazirites has puzzled commentators, recent research is justified in suggesting that a special type of warrior is meant: a young man of exceptional physical strength who sets himself apart from normal life in order to be free to daringly confront and challenge the enemy.[20] Belonging to no army and generally using no traditional weaponry such as sword or bow and arrow, he seems to wage his own, personal war on behalf of the community or, perhaps, on his own account. As a solo combatant, the Nazirite may be compared to the guerrilla in modern military experience, seeking to goad the generally superior enemy with his "hit and run" tactics.

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[20] Lemardelé, Samson.

Since Samson is several times said to be seized by frenzy, identified as the effect of his being seized by the divine spirit (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14), we are justified in calling him a charismatic warrior. Samson may be the only clear example of this social type in the Bible, though there may be traces of other related figures – Shamgar and Shammah.[21]

One particular feature common to biblical and other ancient descriptions of the charismatic warrior is his fierce fighting, accomplished in a state of frenzied fury.[22] In the Samson story, such frenzy is mentioned three times. While in this state, he kills a lion with his bare hands (Judg 14:5-6). When at his seven-day feast Samson's guests managed to solve his riddle with the unfair help of his wife, the hero went into a murderous frenzy: "And the spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon and struck down thirty men of the town" (14:19). To prevent further slaughter, the Israelites – "three thousand men of Judah" (15:11) – captured Samson, bound him, and handed him over to the Philistines. At the moment of his delivery, Samson's frenzy erupted: "The Philistines came shouting to meet him. Then the spirit of Yahweh rushed upon him, and the ropes that were on his arms became as flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands. And he found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, and put out his hand and took it, and with it he struck a thousand men" (15:14-15). In both cases, the vocabulary used by the narrator emphasises the sudden onset of the frenzy; without warning it irresistibly overwhelms the warrior. The warrior's rage can only be moderated by the massacre of a large number of enemies. Even then, he still may have to be calmed down, as was the case with the Irish hero Cú Chulainn, who returned from battle in a dangerous warlike temper.[23] Similarly, even after having killed thirty men, Samson remained in a fury (14:19).

If we compare the figure of Samson with the charismatic warrior described by Tacitus, some common characteristics emerge. First, the charismatic warrior makes a lifelong commitment to his special role. Rather than being a "reservist" warrior active only in times of major military activities supported by the entire nation or tribe, he is continually involved with bellicose action. Even in times of peace, he is intent on killing. Second, he is easily recognised by his appearance, especially by his unkempt hair. Third, he cultivates special techniques in fighting such as the personal provocation of the enemy, and his style of fighting, marked by courage and determination, is a frenzied attack. He also uses unusual weapons or no weapons at all. Fourth, the charismatic warrior is not fully integrated into the fabric of normal society; as a marginal figure, he does not lead a settled family life, and he lives apart from anyone else (in a cave, in the case of Samson). As we shall see, there is a fifth – and, in Samson's case, ultimately fatal – feature of the charismatic warrior's career: his sinful transgression of central social norms.

[21] Judg 3:31; 2 Sam 23:11-12; see Lemardelé, Samson, 275.

[22] On the fascinating theme of martial fury (furor), variously presented as divinely inspired, wolfish rage, or going berserk, see Dumézil, Horace, 11-33; Lincoln, Homeric lússa; Mobley, Empty Men, 60-61.

[23] Dumézil, Horace, 40.

The three sins of Samson

The main interpretive problem of the Samson cycle of stories has to do with the hero's death: how do we account for this sad ending? Is it just the accidental betrayal to a woman of the secret of his strength that ends Samson's career as a hero? And why do the Hebrews tell the depressing story of one of their heroes over whom the enemy ultimately prevailed? The answer that emerges from what follows is, briefly, that Samson was a sinner; as someone who more than once sinfully disrupted civilised life, he deserved his fate.

Archaic societies, although described by some anthropologists as static and harmonious, were actually marked by inner tensions, conflicting options, and compromises. One essential conflict was that between war and peace, or chaos and order, reflecting the opposition between warriors on the one hand, and priests and scribes on the other.[24] Both were important for society, though they represented opposing temperaments: the calm competence and benign humour of the scribes contrasted with the hotheaded, fiery temper of the warriors. Priests and scribes appreciated the services warriors rendered when it came to preventing enemies from raiding the countryside and harassing its inhabitants. But they also knew that the charismatic warrior – who considered warfare his personal calling and who specialised in single combat – posed a severe problem for a society that wished to lead its life in peace and harmony. They pointed out that militarism has its dark side: warriors and their gods feel that they stand above and beyond the law. Claiming masculine independence and autonomy, they defied traditional rules of honourable conduct and had a reputation for perfidy and treachery. The Hindu god Indra, for instance, was said to have broken a non-aggression pact and destroyed his enemy by trickery.[25] The intellectuals of archaic societies regularly discussed the problem of such unlawful aggression perpetrated by the warrior, often describing illegitimate acts as a series of three sins. The Greek hero Hercules offers a particularly instructive case.[26]

Zeus, father of the gods, commanded Hercules to perform strenuous labours stipulated by the king of Argolis. The hero was not at all happy about the tasks that awaited him. He felt that, given his divine lineage, servitude to an inferior was something he did not deserve. His protest against divine authority, however, was a grave sin. Taking advantage of his quandary, the goddess Hera sent a frenzy upon him, and in his vexation, he went mad, murdered his own children, and gave away his wife. All of this did not cancel the divine command, so Hercules still had to do the Twelve Labours. – Later, Hercules fell in love with the daughter of Eurytus. Understandably, this man was reluctant to offer her to someone known to have killed his children. In retaliation, Hercules drove off Eurytus's mares. But Iphytus, son of Eurytus, harboured suspicions about what was going on. Hercules met him, and together they climbed to the top of a lofty tower, in order to watch

[24] On this opposition, see Sergent, L'homosexualité, 215-235; Lang, Abgrenzung.

[25] Dumézil, Heur et malheur, 93.

[26] Diodorus Siculus, Library of History IV, 9-11; IV, 31; IV, 37-38, as analysed by Dumézil, Heur et malheur, 98-105.

out for the horses. No horses were to be seen. Claiming that Iphitus had falsely slandered him, Hercules threw him down from the tower. – Later, Hercules married the daughter of King Ormenius. But he nevertheless desired his old flame, Eurytus's daughter; so he abducted her. This occasioned his third sin – adultery, and the crime did not remain unpunished. Hercules's wife, worried about her husband's infidelity, anointed his ceremonial vestments with what she took to be a love potion. In actuality, it contained deadly hydra venom. When Hercules put on his shirt, it warmed up, and the drug began to take effect. Hercules's devastation was complete, and he eventually committed suicide.

Hercules, then, committed three cardinal sins: that of disobedience to superior divine authority; that of treachery (because he did not confront his enemy by challenging him to a duel); and that of adultery. In each case, as Georges Dumézil argues, Hercules infringed the code of behaviour prescribed in each of the three hierarchically ordered spheres: authority, warfare, and the domestic realm. Through committing each sin, Hercules dissociated himself from one of the realms that, taken together, constitute the wholeness and harmony of life. Having excluded himself from the three spheres and thus from normal human life, he was left with no possibility except death. In other words: death is the inevitable consequence for the totality of sin.

Samson, like Hercules, also committed a trio of sins. Before identifying these, let us briefly note the repeated use of the number three and numbers containing three in this biblical story. Three, thirty, three hundred, and three thousand form its *leitmotif*. For three whole days, Samson's guests cannot solve the riddle he puts to them (Judg 14:14); in the city of Ashkelon, Samson kills thirty men and gives their garments to his thirty guests (14:11, 19); the hero catches three hundred foxes (15:4); three thousand men of Judah come at one point in the story to arrest Samson (15:11); three thousand Philistine men and women view the hero when he is shown off as a prisoner (16:27). Implicit threes can be added to this list: three taboos are imposed on Samson – not to drink wine, not to eat anything unclean, and not to have his hair cut (13:4-5); three times the hero is said to be suddenly seized by God's spirit (14:6, 19; 15:14); the hero is three times involved with a Philistine woman presented, respectively, in the roles of wife, whore, and mistress (14:1; 16:1, 4); three times the hero misinforms his mistress Delilah regarding the secret of his strength (16:7-14); and three times the hero addresses God in prayer (13:8; 15:18; 16:28).

Given the Samson cycle's emphasis on the number three, it will not come as a surprise that the story lends itself to the type of analysis applied to the myth of Hercules: to an analysis of Samson's sinful behaviour in the three spheres of economic, military, and political life. Convinced, then, that it makes sense to look for Samson's three sins, we can indeed identify them without much difficulty.

The first episode involving a sin committed by Samson is that of the feast he celebrates with thirty companions. During the feast, Samson poses a riddle and promises a garment to all who solve it. Although the riddle does not have a solution that anyone could possibly guess, the guests find it by treachery, i.e. with the help of Samson's wife. Enraged, the hero goes to a Philistine city, kills thirty

men, takes their garments, and gives them to his companions. "He struck down thirty men of the town and took their spoil" (Judg 14:19). To kill others simply for spoil, i.e. for material gain, is sinful. The sin does not so much consist in the act of killing as in the wrongful acquisition of wealth. – A second episode tells of Samson's visit to his Philistine wife, with whom he wants to sleep. Samson's marriage is of a special kind, for the husband does not permanently live with his wife, but has the right to visit her and sleep with her occasionally. That a warrior should prefer this so-called *beena* marriage to other types of marital arrangement is evident: his profession prevents him from leading a regular married life centred in his own household. When Samson knocks on the door, his wife's father refuses to let him in. Enraged, Samson cries, "This time I shall be innocent in regard to the Philistines when I do them harm" (15:3). And harm he certainly does inflict: he catches three hundred foxes, binds burning torches to their tails, and thus sets fire to the standing corn of the Philistines, their grain stacks, and their olive orchards. This apparently constitutes an infringement of the ancient code of warfare that disallows the destruction of trees and the devastation of fields.[27] – Finally, there is an episode concerning dissatisfaction with Samson's warfare on both sides: among the Philistines and the warrior's fellow Israelites. For the Israelite authorities, in particular, Samson is a liability rather than an asset, for he continually provokes the enemy who controls their land but otherwise leaves them in peace. As a preventive measure, the Israelites agree to deliver Samson into the hands of the foreign power. When the Israelite army (an army, we are told, of 3000 men) sets out to capture Samson, two types of warrior confront each other – the ordered army comprising respected citizens carrying weapons, and the unarmed individual who relies on himself and his exploits. They capture the warrior, and he pretends to submit to the Israelite authorities. But as he is handed over to the Philistines, the spirit of Yahweh rushes upon him, and, in a frenzy, he destroys his fetters, takes up anything that could serve as a weapon (the jawbone of a donkey), and kills a thousand Philistines. In this case, as in the first one, the sin does not consist in the killing of enemies, but in the hero's disobedience to the Israelite authorities that wish to get rid of the troublemaker. Instead of obeying, his aggressive behaviour continues unabated.

Like the sins of Hercules, those of Samson show a certain pattern. In each case, the accepted code of behaviour in one of the three spheres of human existence is infringed: first the economic code of the acquisition of wealth, then the code of war, and, finally, the code of political authority. By infringing these codes, Samson successively excludes himself from ordered social life: first from the economic sphere, then from warfare, and ultimately from political life. As in the case of Hercules, nothing but death remains. As a consequence of his third sin, Samson apparently loses his wits. Accordingly, he is stupid enough to betray the secret of

[27] The relevant documents are Deut 20:19 and Plato, Republic 470A-471B; Deuteronomy prohibits the cutting of fruit-bearing trees, and Plato argues that one should not ravage the enemy's cultivated land, but instead be content with carrying away the annual harvest. The devastation of fields during warfare is widely attested in antiquity, but is deemed cruel; see the many ancient sources discussed in Lang, Aufstand, 40; Hanson, Warfare.

his strength to Delilah, a loyal Philistine woman. She takes advantage of Samson by having his head shaved while he is sleeping so that he loses his strength, and then delivers him to his enemies. He is then taken captive, blinded, and is put to work grinding at the prison mill. Eventually, he commits suicide in a spectacular fashion, simultaneously killing the three thousand men and women present at a Philistine feast being celebrated in the temple of Dagon. Interestingly, Hercules also committed suicide – one more detail to support the notion that the careers of these two warriors share an identical pattern.

The pattern common to all these stories involves, as we have already explained, the distinction between three spheres of social life: politics, warfare, and a third sphere, variously identified as domestic and economic. At first sight, it may seem that the third of these spheres of social life poses a problem for our comparative analysis: while Hercules fails in domestic life, Samson does so in the realm of economics. However, in Dumézil's interpretation of the archaic tripartite pattern, the "third function", as he calls it, encompasses everything that has to do with fertility in all its forms – marital fertility, the fertility of crops and domestic animals, and wealth acquired by trade or other methods; in short, it relates to women and wealth. Interestingly, the sequence of the sins differs in the two cases. Hercules commits his crimes in the following order:

> defiance of authority (I)
> infringement of the military code (II)
> adultery as sin in the domestic realm (III).

Samson's sins are told in reverse order:

> sin against the domestic/economic code (III)
> infringement of the military code (II)
> defiance of authority (I).

The three spheres in Dumézil's analytical system are hierarchically ordered, reflecting archaic notions of the proper social order according to which political authority ranks first and is followed by the warrior class, while the agricultural producers are given the lowest, third place in the hierarchy. The sins of Hercules are told in descending order, those of Samson, more dramatically, climb up the ladder. Hercules simply completes his list of sins, whereas those of Samson increase in gravity and thereby bring him ever closer to ruin.

Despite the two stories' differences in detail, their underlying patterns coincide. They also serve the same end: to present the warrior, at least in his archaic form represented by Samson, as a troublesome and highly ambivalent figure. Although his qualities of strength and bravery may provide the basis for national defence, the warrior is all too prone to committing antisocial acts in all spheres of life. Once he has started to sin, he soon plumbs the depths of sinful existence, for which death is the only adequate punishment.

To my knowledge, the pattern of the hero's three sins has not previously been applied to the story of Samson. Apparently, it has also been overlooked by the interpreters of other major ancient stories such as the epic of Gilgamesh. This Babylonian hero, who is of divine descent, surpasses everyone else in wisdom, physical power, and virility. But rather than being a just and righteous ruler, he misuses his royal authority over the young men of the city of Uruk (I). He also violates the Babylonian society's domestic code by sleeping with all the young women of his city (III). Finally, he commits a serious crime against the heroic code by killing the monster Humbaba, a harmless creature that pleads in vain for mercy (II). This third sin, recounted in most detail in the epic, finally disqualifies Gilgamesh. Consequently, his search for the secret of everlasting life remains unfulfilled, and he eventually dies without leaving a son.[28] Like Samson and Hercules, Gilgamesh is not held up as an example to emulate.

To summarise: in traditional societies, rules of conduct and behaviour were regularly transmitted not in the form of precepts, but in narrative form. This preference for stories, originally at home in "oral" cultures, persisted after the invention of writing. One example of an ancient didactic tale is the Samson story included in the book of Judges. It discusses the dark side of the Nazirite warrior, exemplified by the three sins he commits: sins that violate the economic, military, and political codes and thus exclude him from society's economic, military, and political life. Since his valour did not overcome the lure of vice, Samson the Warrior is a figure better qualified for supplying the stuff of good storytelling than for encouraging young men to defend society against its enemies.[29] Samson, according to the book of Judges, is compelling as a story character, but he cannot be held up as a role model. He is a flawed hero. To conclude: while the ancients did not reject militarism as such, they had a decided preference for its more restrained and communal forms.

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[28] I develop here the new interpretation suggested by Davenport, Twist. Davenport notes that in an early Sumerian version, the hero oppresses the orphans and the widows of his city – a striking case of misuse of political authority.

[29] For ancient Israelite ambivalence about warfare in general, see the interpretive essay, Lang, Buch der Kriege. For the use of Dumézilian trifunctionalism in biblical interpretation, see Lang, Hebrew God.

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