

The Philistine Woman from Timnah in Judges 14:1–15:8:

Gender Perspectives on the “Philistines” as Stereotype “Others” and “Foreigners”

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Abstract: This paper presents a close reading of Judg 14:1–15:8. The narrative about Samson’s relationship to a Philistine woman from Timnah is read as an example text combining gender stereotypes and ethnic labels of “otherness” and “foreignness.” It highlights elements of a foreign women type-scene and aspects of gender archaeology that might be interesting for further investigation.

1. Introduction

Located in coastal regions, “the Philistines” serve as a stereotype for enemies of Israel and Judah in the Hebrew Bible, especially in the books of Joshua, Judges and Samuel. Like other foreign people, the Philistines do not get one single label in the biblical texts, but the texts reflect an ambivalent view of this people:¹ They are not only enemies, but the stories show aspects of coexistence and some kind of attraction:

“Conflict between Israelites and Philistines seems, indeed, to have been neither automatic nor inevitable. Both peaceful interaction and admiring imitation were among the options being used, as the Samson stories assume.”²

The Samson stories are an example of this ambivalent relationship between Israel and the Philistines. The chapters Judg 13–16 form the last narrative in the first part of the book of Judges. They are more extensive and detailed than the other stories of judges, but the cyclical pattern is incomplete:

“The breakdown of the cyclical pattern of the first part of Judges in the Samson story prepares the way for the second part of the book.”³

¹ Cf. HÄUSL, *Zugänge*, 14.

² FOSTER, *Judges*, 293.

³ FOSTER, *Judges*, 296.

According to the narratives in Judg 14–16, Samson, the strong man with a weakness for women,⁴ has three Philistine women: an anonymous woman from Timnah, a nameless prostitute (אִשָּׁה זֹנֶה) from Gaza (Judg 16:1) and Delilah, the only woman with a name (Judg 16:4: אִשָּׁה בְּנַחַל שֹׂרֵק “a woman in the valley of Sorek”). All three stories are located at the border area between Judah and the region of the Philistines.

This paper concentrates on Judg 14:1–15:8 and Samson’s relationship to a Philistine woman from Timnah as an example text. The following questions guide the examination:

- Which categorizations of “otherness” or “foreignness” do we find in this story, between Israel and the Philistines?
- Are there hints at assimilation, coexistence, attraction or common culture between the two people?
- The foreign woman combines two stereotypes: ethnic labels and gender attributes. A gender-perspective tries to read the story from the woman’s point of view. Which gender-specific aspects or stereotypes does the narrative contain?
- Are there hints at a “foreign women type-scene”? Samson as “charismatic warrior,” a type of the “wild men” has been examined,⁵ but the nameless woman of Timnah as example of a “foreign women type-scene” has not been investigated yet.
- Which torah laws (in the context of im-/purity and divorce), both from the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near Eastern background, are reflected in the story?

2. The Narrative in Judges 14:1–15:8

Judg 14:1–4: Samson’s Attraction to a Philistine Woman Reflecting the Relationship Between Israel and the Philistines

1	וַיֵּרֶד שָׁמְשׁוֹן תְּמַנְתָּה וַיֵּרָא אִשָּׁה בְּתַמְנַתָּה מִבְּנוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים	Once Samson went down to Timnah, and at Timnah he saw a woman from the daughters of the Philistines.
2	וַיַּעַל וַיִּגַּד לְאָבִיו וּלְאִמּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אִשָּׁה רָאִיתִי בְּתַמְנַתָּה מִבְּנוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים וְעַתָּה קַחְרֵאוֹתָה לִּי לְאִשָּׁה	Then he came up, and told his father and mother, “I saw a woman at Timnah from the daughters of the Philistines; now take her for me as wife.”
3	וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ הֲאִין בְּבָנוֹת אַחִידִי וּבְכָל־עַמִּי אִשָּׁה כִּי־אֵתָה הוֹלֵךְ לְקַחַת אִשָּׁה מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים הַגֵּרָלִים וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמֹשׁוֹן אֶל־אָבִיו אוֹתָה קַחְדִּילִי כִּי־הִיא נְשָׂה בְּעֵינַי	But his father and his mother said to him, “Is there not a woman among the daughters of your brother or among all my people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?” But Samson said to his father, “Get her for me, because she is the right one in my eyes.”
4	וְאָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ לֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי מִיָּהוָה הִיא כִּי־תֵאָנֶה הוּא־מִבְּקֶשׁ מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים וְכַעַת הִיא פְּלִשְׁתִּים מִשְׁלִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל פ	His father and his mother did not know that this was from YHWH; for he was seeking a pretense

⁴ Cf. ASSIS, Structure, 4: “all parts of the story are held together through a tension between Samson’s strength and his weakness for the Timnahite woman.”

⁵ Cf. LANG, Sins, 179–192.

to act against the Philistines. At that time the Philistines were rulers in Israel.⁶

V. 1–2: The story is located in Timnah, near Ekron, a town at the border of the area of the Judean hills to the Philistine region. Samson sees a woman in Timnah מִבְּנוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים “from the daughters of the Philistines.” Group identity is created by mentioning places. The first thing we learn about the woman is the place of her living and her Philistine origin. Samson’s attraction to the foreign woman is evoked by seeing her (v. 1–2). He asks his own parents to take her for him as wife (לְקַחַת אִשָּׁה; v. 2.3).

In v. 3, Samson’s parents mark the difference between Israel and Philistines with the terms “daughters of your brothers and all my people” for Israel⁷ and “the uncircumcised Philistines,” a pejorative designation setting a border (cf. Judg 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26.36; 18:25.27; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20; 3:14). It is remarkable that the Philistines are described as uncircumcised, while in pre-exilic times other nations in Israel’s and Judah’s neighbourhood practiced circumcision: the Egyptians, the Edomites, the Ammonites and the Moabites (Jer 9:24–25), and the Phoenicians (Ezek 28:10).⁸

“It seems that the Philistines brought with them from the Aegean world the practice of not circumcising males [...]. This led to their being labelled as *the* ‘un-circumcised.’ However, circumcision as a cultural-ethnic trait seems to have lost its significance in Iron II, and the Philistines apparently started to circumcise their males [...].”⁹

In opposition to that common view of the two people, Samson opposes this difference.

In v. 3 and v. 7, Samson describes the woman he has seen as הִיא יְשֵׁרָה בְּעֵינַי “she is the right one on my eyes.”

It is remarkable that this deuteronomistic terminology of righteousness¹⁰ (cf. e.g., 1 Sam 18:20.26; 2 Sam 17:4; 1 Kgs 9:12) is applied to a foreign woman here. It is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where “being right/righteous” is applied to a woman. From a gender perspective, this is an interesting sentence. Grammatically she is the subject, Samson describes his view on her. Beside its literal meaning “straight” (Ezek 1:7; Ps 107:7), יָשָׁר has an ethical connotation (1 Sam 12:23; 19:7): things, persons, the community (Ps 111:1) can be “right.” Translating the sentence “she pleases me” (NRS), reveals a gender bias: The term is translated in a different way when referring to a woman.

Judges 14:4 is a parenthetical comment, standing outside the main narrative, maybe some kind of “hermeneutical key to the Samson story.”¹¹ The perspective changes in this sentence with a comment of the narrator:

“[...] the reader is being given the privilege of Yahweh’s point of view as the narrator understands it and none of the characters do, which calls sharp attention to what is to be said.”¹²

⁶ If not marked otherwise, translations by the author.

⁷ The Septuagint and the Peschitta read the suffix of the second person singular, “your people” instead of “my people.”

⁸ Cf. WÖHRLE, *Function*, 72; also compare QUACK, *Beschneidung*, 598f.

⁹ FAUST, *Pottery*, 185.

¹⁰ Cf. LIEDKE, *יָשָׁר*, 793.

¹¹ FOSTER, *Judges*, 292.

¹² FOSTER, *Judges*, 297.

Two כִּי-sentences introduce what Samson's parents did not know:

היא מִהֵנָּה הִיא – כִּי מִהֵנָּה הִיא – can refer to the woman (“she is from YHWH”) or to the attraction of Samson to a foreign woman (“it is from YHWH”). As both possibilities hint at the intention of YHWH sending the woman, the semantic difference between these two translations is not significant for the story.

As a *hapax*, it is difficult to translate תִּאֲרָה: “pretext” (NRS) or “occasion, reason, opportunity” (KBL). The noun derives from the root אָרַה II and means “cause” as well as “allow to happen.” It exists only four times: Exod 21:13; Ps 91:10; Prov 12:21; 2 Kgs 5:7.

The Philistines are named as rulers with the stereotype sentence: וְכַעַת הָיָא פְּלִשְׁתִּים מְשָׁלִים כִּי־שָׂרְאֵל “at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel” NRS, see e.g., Judges 14:4 et al. As a participle form מְשָׁלִים describes an ongoing situation.

“It is a neutral term for political overlordship and is not used about any of the oppressors and enemies that recur throughout Judges.”¹³

It describes a situation where the Philistines are established rulers over Israel, but not a synonym for oppression.

“Israelites are peacefully living with Philistines and under Philistine dominance. Now the reader is being told that Yahweh used Samson to break up this acquiescence and replace it with conflict.”¹⁴

This verse is a link to the Judges frame at the end of Judg 15:20, summing up Samson's being Judge.

According to the narrative, Samson and the Philistines get locked in a pattern of mutual provocation, which can be labelled as “border fiction”: “Samson is an instrument for separation to prevent absorption.”¹⁵ Only in Judg 16:23–24, the Philistines name Samson as איבנו “our enemy”, thus stressing the difference.

Judg 14:5–9: Samson the Hero: Fighting with the Lion, Talking with the Woman, Eating Honey with his Parents

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| 5 | וַיֵּרֵד שָׁמֶשׁוֹן וְאָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ תַּמְנָתָה וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־כַּרְמֵי תַּמְנָתָה
וְהִנֵּה כִפִּיר אֲרִיֹת שֹׁאֵג לְקִרְאָתוֹ | Then Samson went down with his father and his mother to Timnah. When they came to the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion roared at him. |
| 6 | וַתִּצְלַח עָלָיו רוּחַ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁפָּעֵהוּ כְּשֹׁפֵעַ הַגִּדִי וַיִּמְאֹקֶה
אִין בְּנִדּוֹ וְלֹא הִגִּיד לְאָבִיו וְלִאִמּוֹ אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה | The spirit of YHWH rushed on him, and he tore the lion apart like a goat – nothing was in his hands. But he did not tell his father or his mother what he had done. |
| 7 | וַיֵּרֵד וַיְדַבֵּר לְאִשָּׁה וַתִּישֶׁר בְּעֵינֵי שָׁמֶשׁוֹן | Then he went down and talked with the woman, and she was right in Samson's eyes. |
| 8 | וַיָּשָׁב מִזְמִים לְקַחְתָּהּ וַיִּסָּר לְרֹאוֹת אֵת מַפְלַת הָאֲרִיָּה
וְהִנֵּה עֲדַת דְּבוּרִים בְּגוּיַת הָאֲרִיָּה וְדִבְשׁ | After a while he returned to marry her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and, look, there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. |

¹³ FOSTER, Judges, 299.

¹⁴ FOSTER, Judges, 299.

¹⁵ FOSTER, Judges, 300.

- 9 וַיִּרְדֵּהוּ אֶל־כַּפְּיוֹ וַיִּנְלֶקְהוּ הַלֶּוֹךְ וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּנְלֶקְהוּ אֶל־אָבִיו וְאֶל־
אִמּוֹ וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם וַיֹּאכְלוּ וְלֹא־הִגִּיד לָהֶם כִּי מִגִּזְיַת הָאֲרִי־הָ
רָדָה הַדְּבָשׁ
- He scraped it out into his hands, and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and his mother, he gave some to them, and they ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the carcass of the lion.

According to v. 1.5.7.19, Samson walks down to Timnah. While his parents mark the borders between Israel and Philistines, he searches contact and communication. Having seen the woman, declaring her as the right one, in v. 7 he talks to the woman. According to the Masoretic Text, his parents, both his father and his mother accompany Samson, but he does not tell them about his fight and the source of the honey. In opposition to his parents, who mark the differences between Israel and the Philistines, Samson talks to the foreign woman and sees her as the right one. He intends לַקְהָתָהּ “to take her” (v. 8), a terminology for marriage. According to Targum Jonathan, Samson does not have direct contact with the woman: The Targum translates לְאִשָּׁה in v. 7 and 10 “concerning the woman.” This reading would underline the general practice that marriage was a contract between families, and the man usually had no contact with his future wife in the Ancient Near East.¹⁶

V. 8–9: Samson does not accept the classifications, he נִסָּר “leaves the way.” This deviation from the regular path concerns not only his marriage interests, but his transgression of purity laws as well: The honey he eats has been in contact with a carcass, which is clearly forbidden in purity Tora (Exod 22:30; 11:39–40; 17:15).

Judg 14:10–14: Samson’s Riddle at the Feast

- 10 וַיֵּרַד אָבִיהוּ אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה וַיַּעַשׂ שָׂם שְׂמֵשׁוֹן מִשְׁתָּה כִּי כֹן יַעֲשׂוּ הַבְּחוּרִים
- His father went down to the woman, and Samson made a feast there as the young men were accustomed to do.
- 11 וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹתָם אוֹתוֹ וַיִּקְחוּ שְׁלֹשִׁים מְרַעִים וַיְהִי אִתּוֹ
- When the people saw him, they brought thirty companions to be with him.
- 12 וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם שְׂמֵשׁוֹן אַחֲזֶנָּה לָכֶם חֲדָה אִם־הִגַּדְתִּי לָכֶם אוֹתָהּ לִי שִׁבְעַת יָמֵי הַמִּשְׁתָּה וּמָצְאתֶם וְנִתְמַתִּי לָכֶם שְׁלֹשִׁים קַדִּינִים וּשְׁלֹשִׁים תְּלַפְתִּי בְּגָדִים
- Samson said to them, “Let me now put a riddle to you. If you can solve it to me within the seven days of the feast, and find it out, then I will give you thirty linen garments and thirty festal garments.
- 13 וְאִם־לֹא תוּקְלוּ לְהִגִּיד לִי וְנִתְמַתְם אִתָּם לִי שְׁלֹשִׁים קַדִּינִים וּשְׁלֹשִׁים תְּלִיפּוֹת בְּגָדִים וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ חֲדָה חֲדָתְךָ וְנִשְׁמַעְנָה
- But if you cannot solve it to me, then you shall give me thirty linen garments and thirty festal garments.” So, they said to him, “Ask your riddle; let us hear it.”
- 14 וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם מִהָאֵל יָצָא מֵאֵכָל וּמֵעַז יָצָא מִתּוֹק וְלֹא יָקְלוּ לְהִגִּיד הַחֲדָה שְׁלֹשַׁת יָמִים
- He said to them, “Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet.” But for three days they could not solve the riddle.

According to the Masoretic text his father went down to the woman in verse 10. This is the only occurrence of the woman in this sequence. After that, the woman is not at all present in this sequence of the story. Furthermore v. 10 tells about Samson’s מִשְׁתָּה

¹⁶ Cf. MARSMAN, *Women*, 50; DÉMARE-LAFONT, *Stellung*, 114f.

“feast” which is qualified as *בן יעשו הבחורים* “in the style of the young men” – suggesting that it is an engagement party. Biblical Hebrew does neither know a word for “betrothal” nor for “marriage.” Our text introduces a feast as common practice at this occasion. It can be labelled as “a prominent marker of social transitions,” but has nothing to do with a religious ceremony.¹⁷

In the structure of the Samson stories the riddle is located in the middle of the narratives.

The story about Samson asking a group of 30 Philistines a riddle, a *חידה*, only works on the basis of common culture, some kind of assimilation or living together:

– Samson talks to the woman (v. 7).

– He celebrates a feast together with Philistines (v. 10).

– The “riddle” only works if there is some kind of common culture and language.¹⁸

– In v. 11 the term *מרעים* “companions/bestmen,” are mentioned the first time: The Philistines *ניקחו אתו* “take 30 companions/friends who are with him.”

– The fact that a group of Philistines functions as bestmen at the engagement or marriage feast of an Israelite is another hint at common living. The term occurs here in the context of an engagement or wedding party. In Gen 26:26–27 it is more general a word for companion or adviser in military context:

26	וְאַבִּימֶלֶךְ הַלֵּז אָלָיו מִגֶּרָר וְאַחֲזָת מְרַעְהוּ וְפִיכֹל שָׂר־ זָבָאוּ	Abimelech went to him from Gerar, with Ahuzath his adviser and Phicol the commander of his army.
27	וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יִצְחָק מֵדִיעַ בָּאתֶם אֵלַי וְאַתֶּם שָׂנֵאתֶם אֹתִי וְתִשְׁלַחֲנִי מֵאַתְכֶּם	Isaac said to them, “Why did you come to me, seeing that you hate me and have sent me away from you?”

The term comes from the root *רע* (“the next one, neighbour”), the same term being used in Lev 19:17–18, the famous law of love of one’s neighbour:

17	לֹא-תִשְׂנֵא אֶת-אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְכָּךְ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֹת- עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חָטָא	You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself.
18	לֹא-תִקֵּם וְלֹא-תִשָּׂר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאַהֲבַת לְרַעֲךָ כַּמִּוֶּד אָנִי יְהוָה	You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am YHWH.

If we consider this wide semantics of *מרעים* in Judg 14, the relationship between Israel and the Philistines is seen as neighbourhood.

Judg 14:15–18: The Philistine Woman between Samson and her People, Solution of the Riddle

15	וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׂבִיעִי וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאַשְׁת־שַׁמְשׁוֹן פְּתִי אֹת- אִישׁוֹ וְנִגְדֵ-לָנוּ אֶת-הַחִידָה כִּי-נִשְׁרַף אֹתְךָ וְנָתַתְּ בֵּית אָבִיךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר הִלְרָשְׁנוּ קְרָאתֶם לָנוּ הַלֵּא	On the seventh ¹⁹ day they said to Samson’s wife, “Coax your husband so that he will solve the riddle to us, or we will burn you and your
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¹⁷ Cf. MEYERS, *Rediscovering*, 159.

¹⁸ Cf. FOSTER, *Judges*, 295.

¹⁹ The Septuagint reads *ἡ τέταρτη* “the fourth,” and some translations, e.g., NRS, follow this version.

- father's house with fire. Have you invited us here to impoverish us?"
- 16 נתבך אשת שמשון עליו ותאמר רַק־שנאתני וְלֹא אָהַבְתַּנִּי הַחַיִּדָה חֶדֶת לִבִּי עִמִּי וְלִי לֹא הִגַּדְתָּה נִיאֲמַר לָהּ הִנֵּה לְאָבִי וּלְאִמִּי לֹא הִגַּדְתִּי וְלָךְ אָגִיד
- So, Samson's wife wept before him, saying, "You only hate me; you do not really love me. You have asked a riddle of my people, but you have not solved it to me." He said to her, "Look, I have not told my father or my mother. Why should I tell you?"
- 17 נתבך עליו שבועת הזמים אשר־היזה להם המשפה נִיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי וְנִגְדַלְתָּה כִּי הִצִּיקְתָּהוּ וַתַּגִּדְהָ הַחַיִּדָה לִבִּי עָמָה
- She wept before him the seven days that their feast lasted; and because she constrained him, on the seventh day he told her. Then she solved the riddle to her people
- 18 נִיאֲמְרוּ לוֹ אַנְשֵׁי הָעִיר בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּטָרָם וְנָבֵא הַחֶרֶסָה מִהֶמְתוֹךְ מִדְּבַשׁ וּמָה עוֹז מֵאָרִי נִיאֲמַר לָהֶם לֹדֵלֵא חֶרְשָׁתָם בְּעִגְלָתִי לֹא מִצְאָתָם חִידָתִי
- The men of the town said to him on the seventh day before the sun went down, "What is sweeter than honey? What is stronger than a lion?" And he said to them, "If you had not ploughed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle."

In v. 15, the woman is introduced as Samson's wife, supposing that the feast is already more than engagement. It shows that engagement and wedding are thought as similar in the legal status. In the dialogue between the people of the town and the woman we find the perspective of the Philistines: they speak to Samson's wife and threaten that they will burn her and her father's house (בֵּית אָבִיהָ) – which they do later in the continuation of the story (Judg 15:6). This first threat of violence seems inappropriate to the bargain Samson proposes.

The people of the town go to Samson's wife and ask her to פתה "coax/deceive/seduce/entice" her husband. פתה pi. means: "talk to somebody," "try to get some information," with sexual connotation of seduction – the German "*betören*" combines these aspects. In Exod 22:15 פתה pi. is used for "seducing" a virgin:

- 15 וְכִי־יִפְתֶּה אִישׁ בְּתוּלָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־אָרְשָׁה וְשָׁכַב עִמָּה מָהֵר יִמְהַרְגֶהָ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה
- When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged, and sleeps with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife

The same motif – the request to פתה "coax/deceive/seduce" her husband – occurs with Delilah in Judg 16:5:

- 5 וַיָּעִלוּ אֵלֶיהָ סָרְנֵי פִלְשְׁתִּים וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהּ פְתִי אוֹתוֹ וְיָדְאִי בָמָה כָּחוֹ גָדוֹל וּבָמָה נִיכֹל לוֹ נִאֲסַרְגָּהוּ לְעֵצָתוֹ וְנִאֲנַחְמוּ נַתְּרֵן־לָךְ אִישׁ אֶלֶף וּמֵאָה כֶּסֶף
- The lords of the Philistines came to her and said to her, "Coax him, and find out what makes his strength so great, and how we may overpower him, so that we may bind him in order to subdue him; and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver." (NRS)

Here we find the gender-stereotype of the foreign woman as "*seducing*" the man. Both women, the anonymous woman from Timnah, and Delilah implore Samson to tell his secret (Judg 14:16; 16:6.10.13), they "press hard" (Judg 14:17; 16:16). The dialogues are similar: the women provoke him by telling him that he does not love them (Judg

14:16; 16:15). The Philistines stand behind the women.²⁰ If we can speak of elements of a foreign women “type-scene,”²¹ it is this moment of seduction. In Judg 14 it is introduced as an appeal of the Philistines – in opposition to Samson’s own description of the foreign woman as יְשֶׁרָה “the right one” in Judg 14:3.7.

The complex and violent relationship between Israel and the Philistines is concentrated in the second half of Judg 14:15: The group of Philistines threatens to burn the woman and her house. Here we find a word-play in Hebrew: While according to v. 3 the woman is יְשֶׁרָה “the right one” in Samson’s eyes, in v. 15 they ask whether they have called them to הִלְרְשֵׁנוּ “impoverish” (cf. Deut 28:42–43 et al.): The verb יִרֶשׁ evokes the complex theme of occupation, heritage, belonging, possession of the land – which cannot be negotiated here.

In v. 16–17 we see Samson’s wife in action. She is named אִשְׁתֹּ שִׁמְשׁוֹן “Samson’s wife”, supposing that the feast is not only an engagement, but a wedding party. She עָלְיוּ וַתִּבְרֶךְ “cries/weeps before him” (v. 16.17) – an action that does not have the sexual connotation of פָּתָה. She names the two opposing groups: בְּנֵי עַמִּי “my people” and herself (לִי). She uses her identity between the two groups to convince him to tell her his secret and solve the riddle.

In v. 18 we find another term for the Philistines: אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר “the people of the town.” Thus, in her speech to Samson she does not consider herself as part of the Philistines. In contrast, Samson makes this difference in telling his decision whom he tells the riddle: He draws a strict line between her and his parents in v. 16.

Her reproach to Samson that he hates her and does not love her is formulated with the words שָׂנֵא and אִהַב. Both words occur also in Lev 19:17–18, in the commandment “to love one’s neighbour/companion.” Thus, beside the root רַע “neighbour,” we have a second link to Lev 19:17–18 in the opposition between love and hatred. Reading this text as a background, love of the neighbour is the theme negotiated in Judg 14:16 – more than love in marriage.

V. 17 mentions two more actions of the anonymous Philistine woman: She הִצִּיקְתָּהּוּ constrained (צוּק hi.) Samson. The translation “nagged” (NRS) is too biased. The word צוּק hi. is combined with the hardship of the enemy (cf. Deut 28:53.55.57). The word is used for Delilah talking to Samson (Judg 16:16), which shows up as another element of a foreign-women type scene.

Her last and powerful action is that she tells (גַּד hi.) the riddle to בְּנֵי עַמָּה “her people”: This makes clear that she sees herself still as part of the Philistines. She moves at the border between the two groups. גַּד “telling” is the power in this story, a “*Leitwort*”:

- Samson tells his parents that they should take the woman (v. 2).
- Samson does not tell his parents that he won a fight against a lion without any weapon (v. 6).
- He does not tell then that the honey is from the lion (v. 9).
- Samson tells his מְרַעִים “neighbours/companions/bestmen” a riddle (v. 12). Telling the solution or not, seals the deal with the garments.

²⁰ Cf. ASSIS, Structure, 3.

²¹ Cf. ALTER, Art, 47–62.

- The people of the town constrain the woman to bring her husband to telling the solution of the riddle (v. 15).
- In the speech of the woman, Samson’s telling of the solution marks the difference between the two people (v. 16).
- Her telling the solution of the riddle to her people (v. 17) leads to the climax of the story.
- In v. 19 the מגידי החידה “tellers of the riddle” get the garments.

In Judges 14:18, the dialogue of Samson with the אנשי העיר “people of the town,” is told in a very concentrated form: The people tell the solution of Samson’s riddle in form of a question, and he gives his answer with a metaphor:

גידי החידה: “If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have found out my riddle.”

Samson compares his wife with an עגלה a “female calf/heifer.” The comparison of a foreign woman with a female calf seems to be a well-known image: In Jer 46:19–24, one of the verdicts towards foreign people (Jer 46:13–24), which can be dated after the battle at Carchemish (605 BCE),²² Egypt is compared to עגלה יפה־פניה “a very beautiful young calf” (Jer 46:20). This imagery of the calf is applied both to the daughter Egypt (Jer 46:19,24) and to the mercenaries of Egypt (Jer 46:21):

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| <p>21 גם־שִׁכְרִיָּה בְּקִרְבָּהּ בְּעֵגְלֵי מִרְבֵּק כִּי־גַם־הִמָּה הִפְנוּ
נָסוּ וַיִּחְדְּדוּ לֹא עָמְדוּ כִּי יוֹם אִיָּתָם בָּא עֲלֵיהֶם עַת
בְּקִדְתָּם</p> | <p>Even her mercenaries in her midst are like fatted calves; they too have turned and fled together, they did not stand; for the day of their calamity has come upon them, the time of their punishment.</p> |
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V. 19–20: Samson’s Defeat – Marriage of his Wife to his Bestman

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| <p>19 וַתִּצְלַח עָלָיו רוּחַ יְהוָה וַיִּנְרַד אֶשְׁקֶלוֹ וַיַּךְ מֵהֶם שְׁלֹשִׁים
אִישׁ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־חֵלְצוֹתָם וַיִּתֵּן הַחֲלִיפוֹת לַמְּגִידֵי הַחִידָה
וַיִּסַּר אִפּוֹ וַיַּעַל בֵּית אָבִיהוּ</p> | <p>Then the spirit of YHWH rushed on him, and he went down to Ashkelon. He killed thirty men of the town, took their spoil, and gave the festal garments to those who had solved the riddle. In hot anger he went back to his father’s house.</p> |
| <p>20 וַתְּהִי אִשְׁתּוֹ שְׂמֻשׁוֹן לַמְּרַעְהוֹ אֲשֶׁר רָעָה לוֹ</p> | <p>And Samson’s wife was given to his companion, who had been his best man.</p> |

After the provocation of the Philistines, Samson becomes violent, too. At the end of chapter 14 Samson וַיַּעַל בֵּית אָבִיהוּ “goes up to his father’s house.” He knows where he belongs. At the end his wife is given to one of מְרַעְהוֹ “his bestmen/companions.” The narrative does not give a clear explanation why the woman is given to somebody else. The chapter ends with a spotlight on the two protagonists: Samson returning home in anger and his wife being handed over to another man.

²² Cf. KESSLER, *Ägyptenbilder*, 54f.

Judges 15:1–8: The Philistine Woman between Marriage and Divorce – Samson’s Revenge

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| 1 | וַיְהִי מִיָּמִים בְּיָמֵי קְצִיר־חֹטִים נִיפְקֹד שָׁמְשׁוֹן אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ בְּגֵדֵי עֲזִים וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִיָּה אֶל־אִשְׁתֵּי הַחֹדֶרָה וְלֹא־נָתַנּוּ אֲבִיָּה לְבוֹא | After a while, at the time of the wheat harvest, Samson visited his wife, bringing along a goat kid. He said, “I want to go to my wife to her room.” But her father did not allow him to go in. |
| 2 | וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִיָּה אָמַר אֶמְרָתִי כִּי־שָׂנֵא שְׂנֵאתָה שְׂנֵאתָה וְנִתְּנָה לְךָ לְמַרְעֵף הֲלֹא אֲחֹתָה הַקְּטָנָה טוֹבָה מִמֶּנָּה תְּהִי־נָא לְךָ תַּחֲתֶיהָ | Her father said, “I was sure that you had rejected her; so, I gave her to your bestman. Is not her younger sister prettier than she? Why not take her instead?” |
| 3 | וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם שָׁמְשׁוֹן נְקִיתִי הַפַּעַם מִפְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי־עָשָׂה אֲנִי עִמָּם רָעָה | Samson said to them, “This time, when I do mischief to the Philistines, I will be without blame.” |
| 4 | וַיֵּלֶךְ שָׁמְשׁוֹן וַיִּלְכֹּד שְׁלֹשׁ־מֵאוֹת שׁוּעָלִים וַיִּקַּח לַפְּדִים וַיִּקְּוּ וַיָּבֵא אֶל־זָנָב וַיִּקְּשׁ לַפִּיד אֶחָד בֵּין־שְׁנֵי הַזְּנָבוֹת בַּתְּנֹךְ | Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took some torches; he turned the foxes tail to tail, and put a torch between each pair of tails. |
| 5 | וַיִּבְעֶר־אֵשׁ בַּלְּפִידִים וַיִּשְׁלַח בְּקִמּוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים וַיִּבְעֶר מִגְדִּישׁ וְעֵד־קָמָה וְעֵד־כַּרְם זֵית | When he had set fire to the torches, he let the foxes go into the standing grain of the Philistines, and burned up the shocks and the standing grain, as well as the vineyards and olive groves. |
| 6 | וַיֹּאמְרוּ פְּלִשְׁתִּים מִי עָשָׂה זֹאת וַיֹּאמְרוּ שָׁמְשׁוֹן חֲתָן הַתִּמְנִי כִּי לָקַח אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ נִיתְּנָה לְמַרְעֵהוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ פְּלִשְׁתִּים וַיִּשְׂרְפוּ אוֹתָהּ וְאֶת־אֲבִיָּה בָּאֵשׁ | Then the Philistines asked, “Who has done this?” And they said, “Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken Samson’s wife and given her to his companion.” So, the Philistines came up, and burned her and her father. |
| 7 | וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם שָׁמְשׁוֹן אִם־תַּעֲשׂוּן כֹּזָאת כִּי אִם־נִקְמָתִי בָכֶם וְאִסַּר אֶחָדֶל | Samson said to them, “If this is what you do, I swear I will not stop until I have taken revenge on you.” |
| 8 | וַיִּךְ אוֹתָם שׁוֹק עַל־יָרֵךְ מִכָּה גְדוֹלָה וַיִּרְדּוּ וַיָּשֻׁב בְּסַעֲרֵי קִלְעַ עֵיטָם ס | He struck them down hip and thigh with great slaughter; and he went down and stayed in the cleft of the rock of Etam. |

In Judg 15:1–8, Samson wants to take אִשְׁתּוֹ “his wife” back. She is under supervision of her father, but at the same time belongs to one of the מְרַעִים “bestmen” (v. 2.6). Samson’s address to his father in law in Judg 15:1 that he wants to go his wife to her room has clear sexual connotation: “I will have sexual intercourse with my wife.”²³

In Judg 15:6, the Philistines see Samson as אֶתְנַן הַתִּמְנִי “son in law of the Timnahite” and the woman as אִשְׁתּוֹ “his wife.” Thus, he is labelled in family relationship with the Philistines. The anonymous Philistine woman is torn apart between different groups and people. At the end, the Philistines burn her and her father.

The different understanding of divorce and adultery laws forms the background of the continuation of the story: While Samson considers the fact that his wife is given to his bestman as adultery, the Philistine father of the woman sees Samson’s behaviour as

²³ ASSIS, Structure, 6.

reason for divorce. According to Judg 15:2 he considers Samson's hatred (שנא) as cause for divorce. Deut 24:1–4 is reflected in the story.

Different aspects of foodways play an eminent role in Judg 14:1–15:8: the agricultural environment (the “vineyards of Timnah” in Judg 14:5, the “wheat harvest” in Judg 15:1, “standing grain,” “shocks,” “vineyards and olive groves of the Philistines” in Judg 15:5), the “honey” Samson eats alone and with his parents (Judg 14:8–9), which is part of the riddle (Judg 14:14), the “goat” (Judg 14:6; 15:1) and the “feast” which is central in the narrative. Samson transgresses the borders of his origin not only by words, but by means of foodways as well. He tries to get in contact with the woman via the “goat,” but this endeavour fails.

3. Elements of a Foreign Women Type-Scene:

Focusing on the perspective of the foreign woman in the story does not make her an active agent, but confirms gender stereotypes. The many parallels between the stories of the anonymous woman from Timnah (Judg 14:1–15:8) and Delilah (Judg 16) in their relationship to Samson make it plausible to recognize a “foreign women type-scene”:

- the attraction of a Judean man to a foreign woman – the hero's attraction to a foreign woman,
- the woman is asked by others to coax the man,
- the tension between love and hatred (Judg 16:15),
- she constrains him with the goal that the hero tells his secret,
- נגד (“telling”) is the power in both stories, a “Leitwort”.

Even if the stories about Samson and his wives contain elements tending towards a foreign women type scene, these single components must be differentiated from the post-exilic stereotype of the foreign woman as it is depicted, e.g., in Prov 1–9. They are embedded in narratives which concentrate on a male hero. The intention – a “warning” of marrying “foreign” women – might be comparable both in the Samson stories and in Prov 1–9.

4. Foreign Women Between Texts and Stones – Aspects of Gender Archaeology

What do we know about the Philistines from archaeology?

Timnah (Tel Batash), a Philistine city at the border of Judah (Josh 15:10) is located near Ekron and Bet Shemesh, in the Sorek valley. It was excavated by Amihai Mazar and George Kelm 1977–1979 and in the 1980ies and 1990ies. It has been settled since the Middle Bronze Age (1750–1550 BCE).

During the transition period from Bronze to Iron Age (in the second part of the second millennium BCE), the Philistines, a group of the Sea Peoples who brought Aegean influence, were a new influence in Canaan. They dominated the southern coastal plain,

had a developed urban culture, and influenced the highlands.²⁴ Archaeology recovered different types of Philistine pottery at the transition of Iron Age I (1200–1000 BCE) to Iron Age II (1000–587 BCE).

“[...] despite the acute material changes, the Philistines did not assimilate but maintained their separate identity throughout the Iron Age [...]. In addition, the transition to Iron II was also accompanied by drastic changes in settlement patterns in Philistia: some sites declined in size and importance, one or two grew in size and significance, and most of the small sites were abandoned altogether.”²⁵

The Philistine pottery from Iron Age I can serve as a boundary marker:

“The clear, visible difference between the Aegean-inspired versus the local pottery made those wares an excellent vehicle for boundary marking [...]. In other circumstances, various groups of immigrants might have turned against one another and stressed their differences, but the common ‘other’ led the newcomers, in this case, to lower their internal boundaries and fortify the external ones.”²⁶

Although Tel Rehov is far away from Timnah, it is remarkable that Amihai Mazar and Nava Panitz-Cohen discovered traces of beekeeping – an apiary, beehives – in an Iron Age IIA context.²⁷ This can be a relevant background for Judg 14:5–9. The Philistines were immigrants who established themselves step by step.

“On one hand, the Philistines were weakened during the transition to the Iron II and no longer fought for hegemony. On the other hand, they were gradually incorporated into the growing and developing Mediterranean economic system.”²⁸

“This dual process, with continued existence and maintenance of identity, on one hand, and rapid acculturation/fusion/creolization/hybridity and changing relations with the surroundings, on the other [...]”²⁹ – is valid both for the texts of the Hebrew Bible and archaeological findings.

Much research about the Philistines has been done, and some of it includes specific gender archaeology. Vessels used at feasts and loom weights are examples of findings which can be analysed from a gender specific perspective. E.g., Assaf Yasur-Landau identifies special Philistine, Aegean influenced cooking jugs, hearth types among other aspects of foodways and household archaeology.³⁰ He maintains that women are responsible for preserving “cultural identity” in contexts of migration, intercultural exchange and intermarriage.³¹ Gender archaeology shows that the division between separate public and domestic spheres as male and female areas of working might be a modern concept. However, these fields are interwoven in complex ways in the agricultural societies of antiquity.³²

²⁴ Cf. FOSTER, *Judges*, 294.

²⁵ FAUST, *Pottery*, 168.

²⁶ FAUST, *Pottery*, 179.

²⁷ Cf. MAZAR/PANITZ-COHEN, *Land*, 202–219.

²⁸ FAUST, *Pottery*, 187.

²⁹ FAUST, *Pottery*, 190.

³⁰ Cf. YASUR-LANDAU, *Old Wine*, 181.

³¹ Cf. YASUR-LANDAU, *Philistines*, 314.

³² Cf. MEYERS, *Engendering Syro-Palestinian Archaeology*, 187.

5. Conclusions

Judg 14 is an example of a narrative about a Philistine woman in the Judean hills, at the border between the Philistine region and Judah. Her story moves between difference, foreignness and assimilation. The connotations attributed to this woman are included in the stereotypes ascribed to the Philistines in general. The field of foodways, the feast etc. as a place of interaction is relevant only for Samson, but not for the woman.

In Judg 13–16 the relationship between Israelites and Philistines is ambivalent: In the narrative frame, Israel is in the hand of the Philistines (Judg 13:1). In Judg 14:3 Samson's parents call the Philistines *הַעֲרֻלִים* “uncircumcised,” thus giving them a negative label, marking them as “the other.” In Judg 15:11 the men of Judah turn against Samson, they regard the Philistine presence, marked as “the other,” as occupation to be endured.

Samson challenges/provokes their differentiation: he looks for encounters, he acts according to his own standards: the foreign woman is *יְשֻׁרָה בְּעֵינָיו* “right in his eyes” (Judg 14:3). He sees her as his rightful property (14:18; 15:1).³³ The Philistines refer to Samson as *בְּתוּר הַתִּמְנִי* “son in law of the Timnite” (15:6). In the beginning Samson is not classified as “other” to the Philistines, only in the last part of the story (Judg 15:1–8), he becomes “the other.”

“Foreignness” and “otherness” is never a general, so-called “objective” category, but it always has a point of departure, a centre of orientation (“*Orientierungszentrum*”).³⁴ The reader is confronted with many perspectives: the parents, Samson, the anonymous woman, her father, the Philistines and the narrator. These perspectives change in the story. We find labels, stereotypes of differentiation, but hints of assimilation and common living as well.

The narrative does not offer a good end for those who transgress the borders: both the foreign woman and Samson – later in the story, after killing much more people – die. At the same time the story shows that many different groups lived together, there is attraction and interaction. With the different perspectives, changing the centre of orientation, the narrative shows that “foreignness” depends on the point of view. It invites to change perspectives and look behind stereotypes.

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³³ Cf. GILLMAYR-BUCHER, *Hero*, 34.

³⁴ Cf. HÄUSL, *Andere*.

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