

Tricky Tales

A man enduring dangerous women, deity, and deception: this description may suggest a famous Greek tale concerning one Odysseus, but they also fit with the story of Samson from the book of Judges. While previous work has compared Samson and the Greek hero Hercules due to their shared divine strength (Gnuse 2018), strength is not the only defining feature of Samson's story: trickery and deception are also recurring themes, encouraging this comparison with Odysseus. By comparing the unheroic traits of the two protagonists and the restoration of order in the conclusions, I will argue that the extent of the structural similarities between the two stories may provide evidence of an extended cultural exchange between the Ancient Greeks and the Israelites.

Neither protagonist is a typical "hero." They are men who repeatedly give in to their fleshly desires (hunger, pride, and lust), and do not complete typical heroic deeds. Both Samson and Odysseus fall due to their pride (Nicholas 2000; Finkelberg 1995). Samson's pride causes him to abandon his wife after his riddle is answered (Judges 14:19 - 20, LXX). Odysseus's pride causes him to reveal his identity to Polyphemus after a successful escape (Book 9). Samson's sexual appetite also leads him into the arms of Delilah, eventually leading to his downfall (Judges 16:4). Odysseus endures the various trials throughout his journey home, ranging from the punishment of the gods to the attacks of monsters. He does not kill monsters to restore peace, even sacrificing his men to Scylla's jaws or tying himself to the mast of his ship to listen to the sirens (Book 12). Typical heroes, especially those of the *Iliad*, would not have been so passive (Cook 1999). Samson also does not complete any typical heroic deeds; he dies at the end of his story, not for a cause bigger than himself but as revenge for his eyesight. He also attacks

Philistines who have done him no wrong, such as the moment he goes to Ashkelon to get the thirty changes of clothes for those who answered his riddle (Judges 14:19). Despite both being protagonists and heroes of their tales, neither is a typically heroic hero. They both fall victim to their passions and appetites and neither complete any particularly heroic achievements.

The conclusions of both stories bring about a restoration of order. Odysseus restores order to Ithaca and his home by returning and reasserting his rightful place as king following the slaughter of the suitors (Heatherington 1976). Samson also restores order through a massive death, though rather than restoring himself to power, he restores the divine order of God as he delivers God's wrath upon the Philistines through the death of all their leaders and hundreds of other people. Samson also dies in the process, fulfilling the blood requirement for his sins committed throughout his story (Judges 16:27 – 31). Through the shedding of blood, both stories are concluded with the restoration of a previous order, Odysseus of his kingship, and Samson of God's justice. Deity is also present in both cases during this restoration indicating that the maintenance of order is beyond human ability though humans can be used to bring about order from chaos. Odysseus defeats the suitors with the divine aid of Athena (Book 22). Later, when the relatives of the suitors come for revenge, it is Athena and Zeus's intervention that prevents the cycle of vengeance from repeating (Book 24). For Samson, his revenge on the Philistines would not have been possible without God extending His Spirit to Samson once more and providing him with the strength necessary to topple the building (Judges 16:28). Though order was restored at the end of both their tales, it was not by their efforts alone, but through the intervention of deity through their works was order brought about.

Though the stories of Samson and Odysseus may not be obviously similar, they share some key similarities that may indicate a shared cultural history through their unheroic personalities and similar story structures.

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