

MANOAH'S WIFE IN LATE SECOND TEMPLE LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

Given the facts that women are ten times less likely to be named in the Bible than are men, and further that Manoah's wife, Samson's mother, is anonymized in the book of Judges, it is both surprising and welcoming to see the attention that she receives in the writings of the late Second Temple era and a bit beyond.

Although she is referred to in a generic sense several times in Judges 14 (*his father and his mother*, vvs. 3, 4, 6), it is in Judges 13 that we see Manoah's wife first mentioned, but even there at least initially it is in a passive role. In vs. 2 she is described as being childless. In vs. 3a an angel comes unannounced and speaks to her. Vvs. 3b-5 are devoted to this angel. Vvs. 6-7 mentions that she went to her husband and she told him both about the appearance of the man of God, and what the man said. She also explains that she did not ask where he was from, nor did the angel so self-identify. In vs. 9 she is passively sitting alone in a field when the angel of God again appears, unannounced. At this point, the woman moves from a passive to an active figure. Vs. 10 relates that she *ran in haste to tell her husband* explaining that the man who came before has reappeared to her. The angel instructs Manoah what his wife is and is not to do; it is unclear as to whether she is present on this occasion. She is present, but wordless in vvs. 19-22. Near the end of the chapter, she again takes an active role. In vs. 23 she wisely points out to Manoah that his fears of their dying because they have seen a divine being are clearly unfounded. *Had YHWH meant to take our lives* God would not have accepted the offering or have made the initial announcement. Finally, in vs. 24a we learn that she gives birth to and then names Samson. There is no etiological explanation given for his name.

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Contemporary scholars take note of the role of Samson's mother. Adele Reinhartz argues that despite her anonymity, she comes into her own as an important figure. She suggests that "contrary to what might be expected, anonymity in this case does not subordinate the woman to the male characters, but rather serves to underscore her centrality to the narrative as well as her affinities with the anonymous angel."¹

Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch point out that "the story of Samson's birth ... was aimed at uprooting an ancient tradition that told how Samson was the son of a divine being and human woman, a tradition like that of the sons of god and daughters of men" recounted in Genesis 6:1-2. As "that story ended up with the birth of giants, so, too, does the Bible allude to Samson's exceptional physical dimensions ... [and] Samson's massive size." These authors note that the biblical text writes that initially the *woman came and told her husband, 'A man of God came to me'* (vs.6). Shinan and Zakovitch then stress that these two "comings" were merely "appearances" for they "carry no sexual implication, though the meaning of the verb 'come' was well known (e.g. *He came to Hagar and she conceived* (Genesis 16:4); see also Genesis 29:21; 2 Samuel 16:21-22)." They go on to point out that Manoah also uses this selfsame verb and that "Manoah's words, too, foil any possible sexual connotation: '*Manoah pleaded please let the man of God that You sent come to us again* (Judges 13:8)." They also note that it is the woman alone who names Samson, "both because she is the dominant figure in the story and because she was the one to whom was given the news of his expected birth."²

Tammi J. Schneider points out that in Judges, the divine "messenger sought out Samson's mother specifically. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that she was the one who had been singled out and that the messenger only spoke to the father Manoah as a last act, primarily for the mother's sake." She goes on to point out that when she is visited for a second time, "Manoah was not with her. This reemphasizes the role of the woman, showing that her messages should be trusted (Judg 13:9)."³ Susan Niditch writes that "Manoah's wife is shown to be worthy of divine information, more worthy than her dolt of a husband." Niditch goes on to write, "As in many traditional cultures, the empowerment of women takes place within the system and is imagined within stereotypical roles." She adds that the narrative "serves to portray Manoah as

outside the loop. God and women deal with matters of birth and the hero's future, as in other biblical annunciations."⁴

It is in the late period of the Second Temple and a bit beyond, that Manoah's wife is of direct interest for several authors. Her role in these texts is expanded; she becomes a more prominent and important figure than she is in the text of Judges. These sources include a section within the works of Josephus' *Judean Antiquities*; a work known as *Biblical Antiquities* (*Pseudo-Philo*) – *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* [L.A.B.]; and another Pseudepigraphic work, *Pseudo-Philo* "On Samson," writings that are explored below.

JOSEPHUS' JUDEAN ANTIQUITIES

Josephus' *Judean Antiquities* (*Antiquities of the Jews*) was composed c. 90 CE. Its purpose is to correct non-Jewish ignorance about Jewish history. In sections 5: 276-285, Josephus writes about the birth of Samson. Quite unexpectedly, Josephus has good things to say about Manoah's wife. More commonly, explains Louis H. Feldman, in "the *Antiquities* Josephus has a number of sneers directed against women," and that Josephus' attitude tends to be "misogynistic."⁵ While, as in the Bible Manoah's wife remains anonymized, Josephus relates other matters: that she was "notable for her beauty" and that she "stood out among the women of her time" (5.276). In his rewriting of the Bible, Josephus enriches his account with "novelistic motifs such as Manoah's mad passion for his wife, his immoderate jealousy and irrational suspicion toward her, [as well as] the astonishing beauty of the woman."⁶

In the Josephus account when Manoah's wife reports to her husband what the angel told her, "the young man's beauty and height" are stressed by the woman. This description serves to inflame the irrational jealousy of her husband (5.279). In response, the woman, perhaps fearful of Manoah's reaction, repeatedly begs God to send the angel back so that he may also be seen by her husband.

In the Bible when the angel returns she again is alone. She then runs in haste to inform her husband of this second visitation (Judg 13:9-10). According to Josephus, however, first she "asked him [the angel] to remain until she fetched her husband, and upon his assent, she sought Manoah" (5.280). Josephus lets his readers imagine the dialogue by which Manoah's wife convinces this being to wait about while she seeks her husband. Ever suspicious and

jealous, Manoah wishes to learn what the angel said to his wife. Whether through pique or ill will, the angel will not reply to that question. Rather he says to Manoah “that it sufficed that she alone would know” what was to be done when the child was born.

Towards the end of this passage in the Josephus account, Manoah tells his wife to roast the kid which he has killed. As in Judges, following the fiery sacrifice and the angel’s final disappearance, Manoah is terrified that they will die. Similar to the Bible, in the *Antiquities* Manoah’s wife calms his fears. He “was encouraged by his wife: it was for their benefit that God had been seen by them” (5.284). While in Judges she names her son on her own, in Josephus’ account when the “child was born, *they* called him Samson, a name that means ‘strong’” (5.285). This name connects directly with what the angel had told her, that her son “would be handsome and famous for his strength” (5.277).

The reader of *Judean Antiquities* learns many things about Manoah’s wife. Josephus comments on her physical presence, he tells us a bit about her personality and her willingness to engage with the angel, even if the text does not provide a dialogue for this. She is a beauty, she stands out among the women of her time, and she has a jealous husband. She admires the handsomeness of her special visitor, not his fearsome appearance as in Judges. While initially she appears to want to tease her husband about this man, she then regrets her actions and backtracks. When the angel appears a second time, as in Judges she runs to get her husband, but not before she gets an assurance that he will wait for Manoah. As in Judges, the wife’s wise counsel offers reassurance to Manoah: they are not suddenly about to die. Unlike Judges which features direct speech by Manoah’s wife, Josephus’ account is told in the third person/omniscient narrator’s voice.

As Silvia Castelli notes, in Josephus and in the Judges narrative, but as one will see below unlike in *Biblical Antiquities* and *Pseudo-Philo*, Manoah’s wife has “a role in preparing the foodstuffs, probably to draw a parallel with the episode of Abraham visited by three angels where the patriarch directs Sarah to make cakes” (Gen 18:6), a parallel that serves to further elevate her status.⁷

BIBLICAL ANTIQUITIES (PSEUDO-PHILO – LIBER ANTIQUITATUM BIBLICARUM [L.A.B.])

Howard Jacobson suggests that *Biblical Antiquities (Pseudo-Philo)* “was almost certainly written between 70 CE and 150 CE.” It is “an example of a genre known as rewritten Bible. The author reviews the biblical narrative from Adam to David, adding, subtracting, embellishing, and revising.” Jacobson goes on to explain that in this work “God is in complete control” of the world, and that, despite the fact that the Jewish people may experience bleak situations, that “God ...will grant salvation and triumph to the Jews.”⁸ Note that this work is not to be confused with *Pseudo-Philo “On Samson”* as is explained in the next section.

Alongside the book of *Jubilees* which probably was compiled in the early 2nd century BCE, *Biblical Antiquities* is the most extensive rewritten Bible of the ancient world. Both works stand in contrast to the Masoretic Text (MT), what is today the established reading of the Hebrew Bible. The MT’s popularity only goes “back to the first century of the Common Era. Before that period, only the proto-rabbinic (Pharisaic) movement made use of MT, while other streams in Judaism used other Hebrew textual traditions” explains Emanuel Tov. “In other words, before the first century of the Common Era, we witness a textual plurality among Jews, with multiple text forms conceived of as ‘the Bible,’ or Scripture, including the Hebrew source upon which the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (LXX), was built.”⁹ *Biblical Antiquities* weaves the biblical text – whichever version(s) the author was using – with its own interpretation of these narratives.¹⁰

The relevant matters pertaining to Manoah’s wife are covered in chapters 42 and 43.1 of *Biblical Antiquities*. The first verse starkly differs from the biblical account. In addition to providing an extended list of Manoah’s antecedents, in place of her anonymity the text provides a name for his wife. She is “Eluma the daughter of Remac.”¹¹

We learn also that “she was sterile and did not bear children to him.” The fact of her childlessness echoes the biblical account. That said, *Biblical Antiquities* then features a great deal of material not found in Judges. Chapter 42.1 continues and explains that each of this couple were assigning the cause

for their lack of progeny to the other person. Both purport to want children. Their childlessness leads to daily quarrels; both are saddened by this fact. One night Eluma actively goes to the upper chambers and prays to God. She wishes to know who is responsible; is it she or is it Manoah that is the cause of their childlessness, or are they both incapable of producing children? Eluma continues and explains to God that she wants to know so that the responsible party or parties can accept their own “guilt and be silent before you” (42:2). She infers that their constant quarreling is detrimental to their marriage. Better to know who is at fault, so that they can accept that fact, and then to move on with their lives. These matters are purely the invention of *Biblical Antiquities*, no such thoughts appear in Judges. This description of Eluma suggests a deeply thoughtful person, someone who is willing to learn that she herself is at fault. Manoah’s wife’s willingness to face facts characterizes her as a woman of great personal courage.

Honoring her request, the next morning God sends an angel to her when she is outside of their home. Differing from the other accounts, there is no description of the physical appearance of this visitor, although he is characterized as an angel. The being explains to Eluma that she is the cause, she is sterile. Nonetheless, having heard her plea and seen her tears, God has opened her womb. She will conceive, bear a son, and he is to be a Nazirite (42:3). Unlike Judges, there are no restrictions for her, but the child is not to eat any fruit of the vine or other unclean things. The angel then departs. Eluma goes into their home and explains to Manoah much of what the angel told her. Again, this is totally at variance with the account in Judges. In *Biblical Antiquities* she takes full responsibility for her mistake in thinking it was her husband who was at fault. She says: “Behold, I put my hand over my mouth, and I will be silent before you always because I boasted in vain and did not believe your words. For the angel of God came to me today and informed me, saying, ‘Eluma, you are sterile, but you will conceive and bear a son’” (42:4). Eluma’s willingness to bow to the report of the angel, as well as her statement that she now will be silent, characterizes her as strong-willed, brave, and admirable.

Despite her taking responsibility for their inability to have children, Manoah does not believe his wife. In his confusion he then goes to the upper chamber of their house. He prays to God seeking divine guidance (42:5).

Even as he is praying, the angel reappears to Eluma. As in the other accounts she is alone – here again in a field – but in this telling of the story it is the angel who tells her to get Manoah, which she does. The angel specifically says, “Run and summon your husband, for God has deemed him worthy to hear my voice” (42:6). Manoah speaks to the angel. By vs. 9 the angel ascends in a fiery flame. In 42:10 Manoah and Eluma both “fell on their faces and said, ‘We will die because we have seen God face to face.’” In contrast to the other accounts here the wife offers no comments. Chapter 43 commences with Samson’s birth, and as in Judges, there is no etiological explanation for his name.

As in *Biblical Antiquities*, so in *Numbers Rabbah* 10.5 Manoah and his wife each accuses the other of being responsible for their childlessness (see also *Leviticus Rabbah* 9.9). The angel’s intervention is to allow them to reconcile. Although she was the cause for their lack of children, she soon would become fertile. Unlike the account in *Biblical Antiquities* where Eluma claims responsibility, the rabbis suggest that she held back this information and merely said she would now become pregnant.

Biblical Antiquities offers a name for Manoah’s wife, and provides vital information about their difficult domestic situation. Eluma is an admirable, resolute, spirited figure. Like the text in Judges she is featured speaking, although she offers no comments regarding their fortune having seen a divine being.

PSEUDO-PHILO, “ON SAMSON”

Although ascribed to Philo of Alexandria (25 BCE-50 CE) it is unlikely that he composed this extended homily. Rather it probably was written somewhere between early the 2nd century BCE and the 4th century CE. The underlying text of this work is the Septuagint (LXX). The “approaches of Philo and *Pseudo-Philo* to the biblical text are quite different. Philo sequentially cites short biblical passages and gives them literal or allegorical interpretation (or both), whereas *Pseudo-Philo* has composed rhetorically embellished literary versions of biblical stories.”¹² *Pseudo-Philo* is Hellenistic, and very different from the work dealt with above, *Biblical Antiquities*. “That work was written in Hebrew, in the Land of Israel, between 70 CE and 150 CE.”¹³

“*On Samson*” is composed of forty-six short chapters. Manoah’s wife again is anonymized; she is not even mentioned until chapter five. On several occasions the text speaks well of her. In the seventh chapter she is lauded for being more ready than her husband to believe that she has seen an angel (7.3). Her description of the angel is similar to the account given in Judges, yet she adds a great deal more verbiage. She speaks of “the venerable dignity and appearance of an angelic image” (8.3). She further describes the visitor’s “grandeur ... [and] the lucent brilliancy of his face” (8.5). When she sees the angel in the field, she not only runs to Manoah, but she also borrows “some speed from the ... angel and adding it to her own run, the woman raced with a bird’s swiftness and reached her husband.” (9.4). She is praised for her “willingness” (11.1) and her “awareness” (12.1). She was able to see the angel for who he was as contrasted to Manoah who “knew not that he was an angel of God” (11.9). “*On Samson*” describes “how the husband was full of fear, while the wife of courage” and it was she who emboldened her husband and gave him needed consolation (18.7). In the biblical text and in Josephus, but not here, the anonymized wife is involved in the preparations for the sacrifice. As noted above in the section on Josephus, Josephus does this as an allusion to Abraham, Sarah, and the angelic visitation in Genesis 18. Here the author does not have her involved. Rather he uses this matter to show how Abraham was the more virtuous host, he offered hospitality before the angel’s promise, while Manoah only offered hospitality after he received a promise for the future. There is no etiological explanation for Samson’s name in this work.

While there are occasions where words are put into the mouth of Manoah’s wife, these are limited and do not match up with the MT’s version. “*On Samson*” commends and compliments Manoah’s wife often for her insights as opposed to his obtuseness about the angel’s true identity. When Manoah fears that they will die, his wife, once again in florid language, assuages his fears (18.5-6), thereby earning herself additional praise by the narrator.

CONCLUSION

Although in the book of Judges Manoah’s wife is not named, she plays an increasingly active part in the drama leading up to and including the birth and naming of Samson. On two occasions an angel suddenly, and without prior

notice, appears initially only to her. She is told that she will conceive, and she is to follow certain restrictions for her son is to become a Nazirite. Towards the close of Judges 13, it is Manoah's wife that offers her husband wise counsel when he is fearful that they will die, having seen a divine being. It is she alone who names Samson. In Judges she has several speaking parts, and time and again she rises to the occasion. Given that women are so infrequently mentioned in biblical literature, even in her anonymity she has a special and honored place among women.

In the world of late Second Temple times and a bit thereafter, several authors turned their attention in a favorable way to Manoah's wife, taking their lead from her positive portrayal in the biblical text. These three examples of late Second Temple Literature each contribute more positive aspects to Manoah's wife in their own way by adding aspects of beauty, strength, courage and activity only hinted at, if that, in the biblical text itself.

NOTES

1. Adele Reinhartz. "Samson's Mother: An Unnamed Protagonist." *JSOT* 55 (1992), 37 [25-37].
2. Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch, *From Gods to God: How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, or Changed Ancient Myths & Legends*. Trans. Valarie Zakovitch. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press/Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2012, 194, 189-190, 192. See also Yair Zakovitch, "The Strange Biography of Samson". *From Bible to Midrash: Portrayals and Interpretive Practices*. Hanne Trautner-Kromann, Ed. Lund: Arcus, 2005, 19-36.
3. Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*. Berit Olam. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier, 2000, 197, 199.
4. Susan Niditch. *Judges; A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008, 143, 145.
5. Louis H. Feldman. *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*. Berkeley: University of California, 1998, 190, 191.
6. Silvia Castelli, "The Birth of Samson" [In Josephus' *Judean Antiquities*]. In *Outside the Bible: Ancient Writings Related to Scripture*. Vol. 2. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman, (Eds.) (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 1244. The translation is adapted from that of Christopher Begg, *Flavius Josephus: Judean Antiquities 5-7*, in *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, 2005.
7. *Ibid.*, 1248.
8. Howard Jacobson, "Pseudo-Philo, Book of Biblical Antiquities." In *Outside the Bible: Ancient Writings Related to Scripture*. Vol. 1. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman, (Eds.) (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 470, 472. See also D. J. Harrington, "Pseudo-Philo." In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Vol 2. James H. Charlesworth, (Ed.), Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985, 299. The translation used here is by Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*. 1996. There is

some scholarly debate as to the dating of *Biblical Antiquities*. As noted, Jacobson suggests 70-150 CE. Feldman places it “shortly before or (more likely) shortly after the great revolt against the Romans,” perhaps c. 75-85 CE. (Feldman, *Josephus’s Interpretation*, 16). Assuming that the later date (70-150 CE) is the more likely one for a final editing of this work, in this article *Biblical Antiquities* follows the account by Josephus.

9. Emanuel Tov, “The Bible and the Masoretic Text”, *The (Proto-)Masoretic Text: A Ten-Part Series*, (2017). TheTorah.com. <http://thetorah.com/proto-masoretic-text>

10. Harrington, “Pseudo-Philo,” 301.

11. Rabbinic writings also address Manoah’s wife. The greatest concentration of midrashic material pertinent to Manoah’s wife is found in *Numbers Rabbah* 10.5. There we learn that Manoah’s wife was named Hatzlelponi or Tzlelponi; further she hails from the tribe of Judah. The midrash refers to 1 Chronicles 4:3. When describing the history of the tribe of Judah, mention is made of Zorathites, and Manoah lived in Zorah (Judg 13:2). The Chronicles text mentions a woman Hatzlelponi; she then is conflated with Manoah’s unnamed wife (cf. TB *Baba Batra* 91a).

12. Gohar Muradyan and Aram Topchyan, “Pseudo-Philo, *On Samson* and *On Jonah*.” In *Outside the Bible: Ancient Writings Related to Scripture*. Vol. 1. Louis H. Feldman, James L. Kugel, and Lawrence H. Schiffman, (Eds.) (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2013), 750. Translation by Gohar Muradyan and Aram Topchyan.

13. *Ibid.*, 801, n. 4.



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