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SAMSON AND HERCULES

A comparison between the feats of Samson and the labours of Hercules

by GARY G. COHEN

THIS fresh examination of the solar-myth theory of the Samson story, which was propounded at least as early as 1856, comes from the Professor of New Testament in Faith Theological Seminary, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Dr. Cohen is the author of "Pilgrim's Progress in the Twentieth Century" (1968), "Understanding Revelation" (1968), and "Biblical Separation Defended" (1966), and served as Coordinating Editor of Volume II of the "Encyclopedia of Christianity" (1968).

I. THE PROBLEM

IN this article we are concerned with the hypothesis which connects the Biblical hero Samson in one way or another with the Greek strongman Hercules.

The hypothesis, which is advocated or alluded to in many commentaries is that either (1) one of the two accounts, i.e., Samson or Hercules, borrowed from the other, or (2) because of parallelisms, both show that strongman stories follow the same pattern in their mythological development. It has been suggested by some that since Samson's name is derived from Hebrew *shemesh*, which means "sun", the Samson account is a solar myth wherein the hero, the sun, fights the various animals in the heavenly Zodiac as the sun makes its yearly run.

As a result of reading such suggestions from time to time, the author has been stimulated actually to look into the matter himself to see whether or not these claims are stated as accurately as is averred. Did Samson, like Hercules, perform exactly twelve labours? Is Samson a solar myth or a Hebrew version of the Hercules story?

Here it might be valuable at the outset to state some sample observations which have been made by various commentators in the past. Dr. Edward L. Curtis of Yale University some years ago wrote:

Samson's name may indicate nothing further than that he was a "sun worshipper"; but when his exploits are considered as well as his name, it is hard to believe that he like Hercules was not in some way a personification of the sun. There is a certain parallelism between these two men in strength. Each begins his career by strangling a lion; each perishes through the wiles of a woman;

each catches wild beasts, although the beasts of Samson are only foxes.¹

Dr. Curtis also wrote in the same commentary on the Book of Judges, "... his (Samson's) exploits are not inaptly compared with those of the Greek Hercules".² George Foot Moore wrote in the ICC volume on Judges the following:

The similarity, in several particulars, between the story of Samson and that of Herakles (i.e., Hercules) was early noticed; see Euseb., *chron. canon*, ed. Schoene, ii, p. 54 (some compare his deeds with those of Herakles) . . .

The older writers contented themselves with drawing out the parallels to the Herakles myth: each begins his career of adventure by strangling a lion; each perishes at last through the machinations of a woman; each chooses his own death. Samson's fox-catching is compared with the capture of the Erymanthian boar, the Cretan bull, the hind of Artemis; the spring which is opened at Lehi to quench his thirst, with the warm baths which Sicilian nymphs open to refresh the weary Herakles; the carrying off of the gates of Gaza reminds some of the setting up of the Pillars of Hercules, others of Herakles' descent to the nether-world. Meier and Ewald even discover that Samson has exactly twelve labours, like Herakles (in late systems). Steintal not only identifies Samson with Melqart-Herakles, but attempts to explain the whole story as a solar myth. . . .³

These claims, then, provide the field for the present brief inquiry.

II. A COMPARISON OF THE CHRONOLOGICAL DATA

A. *The Date of the Hercules Account*

Plutarch, in his famed accounts of the lives of ancient Greek and Romans, makes Hercules a contemporary of Theseus who founded Athens. However, not only does Plutarch confess his lack of certainty with regard to these early days, but also no one is decisively sure of even Theseus' date.⁴ The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* states concerning Hercules: "Probably a real man, a chieftain of Tiryns in Mycenaean times and vassal to Argos, lies behind the very complicated mythology of Heracles."⁵ If this is correct, then the original real man behind the Hercules legends lived somewhere

¹ Edward L. Curtis, *The Book of Judges*, in the series: *The Bible for Home and School*, ed. Shailer Mathews (New York: Macmillan, 1913), p. 135.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

³ George Foot Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges in The International Critical Commentary* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), p. 364.

⁴ Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (New York: Random House, Inc., n.d.), pp. 3, 22-23.

⁵ H.J.R., "Hercules", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1956, Vol. 11, pp. 481-82.

in the 13th and 14th centuries B.C. when the Mycenaean civilization was at its zenith in Crete. Murray noted that,

In the Iliad (v. 395) Heracles is the hero whose unerring arrows wounded Hera and Hades. In the Odyssey (viii. 224) Heracles and Eurytus are described as the most celebrated marksmen of bygone times⁶

Thus Hercules the archer is portrayed by Homer at about the 10th century B.C., although here some allusions to labours of strength were also given.⁷ Jumping about 350 years it is next to be noted that the poets Pisander and Stesichorus were the ones who first made Hercules' *twelve* labours their theme.⁸ Stesichorus wrote in the 6th century B.C., but Pisander's dates seem nowhere to be found.⁹

Putting together the available evidence, it seems that the Hercules saga evolved from the accurate bowman who did feats of strength to the great strongman of antiquity. Murray declares that, "in the Odyssey (viii. 224) Heracles and Eurytus are described as the most celebrated marksmen of bygone times," and he adds: ". . . in early works of art, it is his character as a bowman that principally represented."¹⁰

Thus, the *man* Hercules dates back to the 13th-14th centuries B.C.; the mighty *bowman* to about the 10th century B.C.; and by the 6th century B.C., Stesichorus' time, the Hercules of the Twelve Labours is prominent as the world's greatest mythological *strongman*!

B. The Date of the Samson Account

Judges 16: 31 says of Samson, "And he judged Israel twenty years." This judgeship occurred during the "Philistine Oppression in the West" which must be dated during the first half of the 11th century B.C. This particular oppression period ended at the Battle of Ebenezer in 1047 B.C. when Israel under Samuel finally broke the Philistine yoke (1 Samuel 7: 7-14).¹¹ Samson's twenty year judgeship is placed at the last half of this Philistine oppression, during the period c. 1069-1049 B.C.¹² This then, is the time when

⁶ Alexander S. Murray, *Manual of Mythology*, revised (Philadelphia: David McKay, Publisher, 1895), pp. 293-294.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "Stesichorus", *Collier's Encyclopedia*, 1958, Vol. 18, pp. 214-15. [Pisander of Rhodes is provisionally assigned to the sixth century B.C.]

¹⁰ Murray, pp. 293-94.

¹¹ John C. Whitcomb, Jr., "Old Testament Patriarchs and Judges" (Chicago: Moody Press, 1961), Chart.

¹² *Ibid.*

the man himself lived according to conservative scholarship in general, and many liberals would not desire radically to push the dates one way or another.

As to the date of the actual writing of the Samson account in the Book of Judges, Unger well summarizes the evidence when he says:

The internal evidence of the book of Judges and tradition suggest an origin during the early years of the Hebrew monarchy, likely in the time of Saul (c. 1020 B.C.). That Samuel as a member of the prophetic school may well have been the author and compiler is suggested on the basis of the following reasons:

First, the book displays the unity of a single author-editor. . . .

Secondly, the author was in large measure a compiler. . . .

Thirdly, the book contains evidences of belonging to the age of Saul. . . .

Fourthly, Hebrew tradition holds that Samuel was the author. . . .¹³

Thus the date of c. 1020 B.C. is the time of the writing of the Samson account, or at least the date of the editing of an earlier account by the inspired sacred historian, probably the prophet Samuel.¹⁴

C. The Significance of the Chronological Data

The following chart summarizes the chronological data:

Century B.C.:

14 The man Hercules (?)

13 The man Hercules (?)

12

11 The man Samson

The Book of Judges written probably by Samuel.

10 The Homeric writing of Hercules the Bowman.¹⁵

9

8

7

6 The Greek poets tell of Hercules the strongman; they tell of his 12 labours.

From the above it can be quickly observed that the trend of the evidence in the chronological field points to the Samson account being written in Judges both (a) before Homer wrote of the Greek archer-strongman and (b) before Greek poets even began to style the great feats of Hercules into twelve mighty works. Only the man

¹³ Merrill F. Unger, *Introductory Guide to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956), pp. 290-92.

¹⁴ See Keil and Delitzsch's introduction to Judges in their commentary on this book for an excellent defence of the conservative date.

¹⁵ *Collier's Encyclopedia*, 1958, in its article "Homer" says on the poet, ". . . and estimates as to the date of his birth range from the eleventh to the seventh century B.C." (Vol. 10, p. 126).

behind the Hercules tale, if there be such a one, and the earliest pre-Homeric Hercules myths—and if there were any such tales written we have no copies or traces of them—could pre-date the Samson account in Judges.

Since the enumeration of Hercules' labours into any set of twelve does not appear in Greek writings until the early half of the 6th century B.C., about 450 years after the Samson record was written in Judges, attempts to push Samson's works into a set of twelve are to no avail. In fact, F. W. Farrar, one evangelical who has dealt with the topic, notes:

. . . Nor can it be made out, without arbitrary combination, that *twelve* of his acts are recorded (Bertheau). The attempt to draw out a parallel (as Roskoff has done) between the acts of Samson and the labours of Hercules is entirely valueless and unsuccessful, although, as will be seen from the notes on chaps. xiv. 6-12, xv. 4-14, xvi. 6, *parts of his story may have crept into Greek legends through the agency of Phoenician traders*, and though certain features in his character—e.g., its genial simplicity and amorous weakness—resemble those of the legendary Greek hero.¹⁶

Thus it appears that there is no real evidence from a chronological viewpoint to suggest that the Samson account is based in any way on the Grecian Hercules tales. In fact, it has been seen that not only did the chronicler of the Samson record not force Samson into a prior existent Herculean mould of twelve labours, but that the Samson narration was written centuries *before* the Greek poets began to come forward with the Hercules of the "*Twelve Labours*."

On present evidence, therefore, a theory of the Biblical story coming from the Greek myth is seen to be without foundation, contrary to the evidence, and a hypothesis built upon bias rather than upon facts.

III. A COMPARISON OF THE LABOURS

A. *The Labours of Hercules*

The Labours.—Hercules, son of Zeus, as an infant strangled the serpent sent by Hera to kill him. As a youth he slew Linus his music teacher for punishing him, for which Amphitryon his master took him away to live in the hills. At eighteen, the legend goes, he slew a lion at Mount Cithaeron and on his return, the skin upon his shoulder, he cut off the ears and noses of the king's tax-collectors. After he worked wonders in a war on behalf of the city of Thebes, as did his half-brother Iphicles, Hera persuaded King Eurystheus to command Hercules to serve him. Hercules

¹⁶ F. W. Farrar, "Judges", *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 239.

was told by the Delphic Oracle that he would gain immortality if he performed twelve labours given to him. He then went to Mycenae, about fifteen miles south of Corinth on the north-eastern corner of the Peloponnesus, and began the twelve labours.¹⁷

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes that, "The numerous tasks imposed by his master (Eurystheus) were arranged at some unknown *but not early* date in antiquity into a cycle of 12 (the 12 Labours or *Dodekathlos*) . . ." ¹⁸ These tasks were as follows:

(1) *The Nemean Lion*. Hercules strangled this beast and from henceforth wore its impenetrable skin for his own protection.

(2) *The Lernean Hydra*. This beast had nine heads each of which grew two more when one was severed. Hercules killed it as ordered, but the ninth head, being indestructible, had to be buried alive.

(3) *The Erymanthian Boar*. After fighting off the Centaurs Hercules brought the wild boar back to Mycenae alive.

(4) *The Ceryneian Stag*. After a chase of one year the hero captured this animal which had antlers of gold and hoofs of brass.

(5) *The Stymphalian Birds*. With poisoned arrows Hercules routed these iron-clawed birds who ate human flesh.

(6) *The Augean Stables*. Hercules here was to clean the stables of 3000 oxen which had not been cleaned for thirty years. He did this in the required one day by causing a river to pass through them. At the end, Hercules became involved in a war because Augeas, the owner of the stables, did not pay him his due reward for the job.

(7) *The Cretan Bull*. Hercules captured this wild animal and sat on its back as it swam from Crete to Mycenae. This, I calculate, by the shortest water route, stopping at Islands, would involve about a 60 mile swim!

(8) *The Horses of Diomedes*. The duty here was to capture and bring to Mycenae this herd of flesh-eating horses. Hercules, to accomplish this, had to vanquish the guards and owner of the steeds.

(9) *The Belt of Hippolyte*. Here Hercules slew Hippolyte, Queen of the Amazons, by mistake, being deceived by Juno. After sundry deeds, he at last returned with the coveted prize.

(10) *The Cattle of Geryon*. The mighty man here journeyed to Erytheia, "an island . . . in the remote West," slew the two-headed dog of the six-armed three-headed Geryon, struck down Geryon

¹⁷ Murray, pp. 291-93.

¹⁸ "Hercules", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, XI, p. 481. Italics mine.

with a shaft, and shipped the cattle home. During this quest Hercules fought with giants and did other wondrous deeds.

(11) *The Apples of the Hesperides*. In a worldwide quest, going from the nymphs, to the sea god Nereus, to the giant Antaeus whom he slew, to Egypt, to India, and finally to the three golden apples themselves in the garden of the Hesperides, Hercules killed the dragon that guarded them and took the apples. According to another version, Hercules held up the world as Atlas picked the apples for him!

(12) *Cerberus*. In this task the energetic Grecian had to bring Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guarded the door to Hades, up to the upper world. Amid this chore he on passing gave life to a few dead friends by giving them blood from a cow in Hades!¹⁹

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentions a point here well worth noting when it says:

Subsidiary to the *Dodekathlos* (the "12 labours") is a series of minor adventures called *Parerga* ("side-works"). For example, during the 4th (3rd) labour, he met and fought the Centaurs; during the 11th, he wrestled with the giant Antaeus. A further series of enterprises, undertaken after he was free from the service of Eurystheus, are known as *πράξεις* (*Praxeis*, "acts"). These include the campaigns against Troy, Elis, and Pylos. Other notable incidents are his struggle with Apollo for the sacred tripod at Delphi, . . . and the Argonautic expedition.²⁰

To complete his story it may be noted that he went through a period of madness and for misdeeds done at this time was sentenced for three years to serve Omphale, Queen of Lydia. She gave him women's work to do such as spinning during this time. Finally he died by putting on a poisoned robe sent to him by his wife Deianeira. She, however, was deceived by the Centaur Nessus who had told her that the poison was a potent to make Hercules love her. Jupiter then received the valiant warrior and made him an immortal god.²¹

Their Number. As has been easily seen from above, the number of Hercules' labours in actuality are far closer to one hundred fabulous feats than to twelve. The twelve, however, are the most celebrated and renown, but the *Parerga* ("side-works") and *Praxeis* ("acts"), it must be kept in mind, were no mean tasks for even a super being!

¹⁹ Murray, pp. 293-309; and Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable* (New York: Heritage Press, 1942), pp. 146-52. Some writers vary the order of the labours.

²⁰ "Hercules", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, XI, pp. 481-82.

²¹ Murray, pp. 293-309; and Bulfinch, pp. 146-52.

Their Nature. The deeds of the Hercules story, or stories, are completely in the fabulous realm. They are super-human, arbitrary and fantastic. Whatever the man behind the legends did, if such a one lived, the Hercules who has come to our generation is a fabulous character who conquers fabulous beasts by fabulous methods. Morality is not a facet of the hero's basic being, as the legends go, for theft and robbery plus treachery and murder are common to this demigod alongside of his good deeds!

*B. The Feats of Samson*²²

The Feats. The following feats of moment were performed by Samson in the biblical accounts in Judges 13-16:

(1)*He slew the young lion at Timnath (Judg. 14: 5, 6);²³

(2)*He slew thirty of the Philistine oppressors at Ashkelon (Judg. 14: 19);

(3) He burned the Philistine corn by the use of 300 jackals which he had caught (Judg. 15: 4-5). He may have had assistance in snaring these animals which travelled at that time in large packs (the Hebrew word signifies the jackals rather than the fox as the animal trapped);

(4) He smote the Philistines with a great slaughter (Judg. 15: 8);

(5)*He burst the two new cords with which the men of Judah had bound him (Judg. 15: 14);

(6)*He "smote" (*nakah*, in the Hebrew, meaning to strike or hit) an *eleph* of men with the jawbone (*eleph* in the Hebrew can mean a "thousand," a "tribe," or here an "ox-load"), slaying so many that heaps of bodies were left on the battlefield (Judg. 15: 15-16).

(7) He carried off the doors and posts of the gates of Gaza (Judg. 16: 3). Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's commentary quotes approvingly Van de Velde who suggests that these gates were carried amazingly to the top of the hill El-Montar, a three-quarters of an hour journey from Gaza which was on the way which led towards Hebron.²⁴ Indeed, carrying the gates from Gaza "to the hill toward Hebron" does not at all signify that he carried them the entire 40 miles to Hebron.

(8) He broke asunder the seven green vegetation-cords with which Delilah had bound him (Judg. 16: 7-9);

(9) He broke the new ropes with which Delilah had bound him (Judg. 16: 11-12);

²² "Feats"—these were not *assigned* labours.

²³ The asterisk signifies that the deed was done by the "Spirit of the LORD".

²⁴ Page 197.

(10) He arose and left the house with the pin, beam, and web which Delilah had used to weave his hair. He did this with these implements attached to his hair (Judg. 16: 13-14);

(11)*He pushed down the two supporting pillars in the Temple of Dagon, thus causing the edifice to collapse, and consequently killing many of the Philistine oppressors of Israel (Judg. 16: 23-31). In this last feat, *after a prayer*, he himself was killed in the fall of the structure.

Their Number. Above seem to be the only feats which were performed by Samson's great strength and recorded in the Scriptures. The number seems to be eleven rather than twelve, although some might even combine (5) and (6) as one episode since they actually happened on the same occasion. If we permit this, we then have Samson performing only ten great deeds. Curtis, typically, remarks on Samson's finding the swarm of bees in the dried out lion carcase, ". . . the appearance of the bees and honey must be regarded as a wonder and be classified with the other marvels of the stories of Samson."²⁵ Not only could such a happening not be compared to the triumphs of Hercules, but according to Herculean standards the list of eleven for Samson's feats would have to be reduced, rather than raised. The three deeds performed before the pleading Delilah, before she learned the truth, would probably be too insignificant even to be mentioned amid the demigod Hercules' successes. Certainly Samson's feats can in no wise be cast into any neat mould of one dozen!

Their Nature. The Samson account four times declares that "the Spirit of Jehovah" moved Samson (Judg. 13: 25; 14: 6, 19; 15: 14). Thus it was the Spirit, God, to whom the narrative gives the credit for allowing the man Samson to slay the lion bare-handed, to slay the thirty Philistine oppressors at Ashkelon, and to break the ropes with which the men of Judah had tied him and to thereupon smite the *eleph* of men with the jawbone. Furthermore, after this last event, Samson acknowledges that God was the supernatural one who had wrought the deliverance (Judg. 15: 18). When Samson was about to push down the pillars of Dagon's temple he prayed to Jehovah for strength from on high (Judg. 16: 28) and the plain Biblical implication is that God gave him the needed strength.

Although Delilah looked for a magic source of Samson's power, the answer to his strength, Bible students have always seen, lies *not in the hair of the man, but in the God of the hair*—for Samson

²⁵ Curtis, p. 139, on Judg. 14: 8.

was a Nazirite dedicated to God, and his long hair signified this dedication (Judg. 13: 5). When Samson gave Delilah this so-called secret . . . when he revealed to her the emblem of his dedication to Jehovah, the source of his strength . . . seeing the circumstances, the shearing of his hair was the direct result of this selling of his birthright to Delilah for her mess of pottage. Then, like Esau, Samson lost his power because he "despised his birthright" (Gen. 25: 29-34; Judg. 16). However, in Samson's case, God restored that power as the Nazirite sign of his dedication became restored, i.e., as his hair grew again (Judg. 16: 22-31, especially v. 22).

The appearance of the angel of Jehovah in Judges 13 is not meant to be magical, but the sober truth! Christ Himself everywhere authenticated the real existence of angels (Mt. 25: 31; etc).

Although Samson's character is the most imperfect of the heroes in the Book of Judges, it should be remembered that when he slew Philistines he was executing God's judgment on the oppressors of God's chosen people. He was delivering Israel from wicked idolators as the angelic prophecy of a sovereign God predicted that he would (Judg. 13: 5). Thus his smiting of the Philistines was not murder, but the rightful execution of God's sentence upon a sinful nation. The fact that Samson had to wait until God showed him the infamous character of the Philistines (e.g., they *burnt* his intended bride and her father with fire) before he fought them, does not change the fact that he was still, when he did get around to doing it, executing the sovereign righteous God's just sentence upon the wicked.

C. *A Comparison of the Two Sets*

As has been shown above, the account of Hercules abounds in the fabulous, is generally amoral if not immoral, and comprises not a mere twelve labours to which Samson's feats may be neatly compared, but on the contrary Hercules' works consist of about one hundred labours. Whether these, especially the "twelve labours" (with many minor ones accompanying them), represent a solar myth, with Hercules travelling the zodiac as the sun, or whether they are purposeless stories from which later moralists have tried to learn profound lessons, has not been dealt with here as they do not change the nature of the account. It is a wild and fabulous tale which is both interesting and amusing; it is excellent fiction!

On the other hand the account of Samson is portrayed in the Bible in the light of a man given power and duty from the holy God. True, he is aided by supernatural power and he is angelically announced before his birth, but in the Biblical Christian con-

servative framework this is seen to be the sober truth, for the God of miracles does exist. This God did choose Israel, and He often dealt with man through angelic messengers. Samson's feats are astounding, but never fabulous. His strength is colossal, but it is human strength aided by the God of all-power.

D. Conclusion Concerning the Labours

In light of the above, it must be concluded that no true comparison exists between Hercules' labours and Samson's feats. Neither man is the prototype for the other, nor can any reasonable man hold the contrary view in light of the compelling nature of the evidence.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thus it has been noted that both on the grounds of the chronological data and on the grounds of the comparison of each man's labours that there is no basis for the rationalistic assertion that Hercules provides the pattern for the Samson narrative. Further, it has been seen that the differences far outweigh the similarity that both were strong. Samson is of history; Hercules is of fantasy.

Let it also be noted that with reference to Curtis' observation, "Each begins his career by strangling a lion; each perishes through the wiles of a woman . . ."—Hercules in infancy began his deeds by strangling the serpent sent by Hera to kill him. This was some eighteen years before he bagged his first lion—and there were at least two! Also, Samson was only *captured* through the wiles of a woman, he perished by his own sacrificial choice (Judg. 16). Hercules, on the other hand, did *not* perish through the wiles of a woman! He died because of the deception of a Centaur who deceived his wife. Hercules' wife loved her husband, and in fact (i.e., in factual legend), committed suicide on learning of his demise.

Fairbairn's words may well conclude this inquiry,

But as regards the rationalistic view of what is called the legend of Samson—a view which has been variously modified, but which finds in it only an Israelitish form of the fabled exploits of Hercules (Bauer, Vatke, Ewald, Bertheau, etc.)—as it has nothing properly to rest upon but a few formal resemblances, coupled with a desire to get rid of everything supernatural, it is unnecessary to go into detail. When rightly viewed there is no real analogy between the two cases; and it is by light derived from Israelitish not from heathen soil, that the life of Samson is to be interpreted and judged.²⁶

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²⁶ Patrick Fairbairn, "Samson", *Fairbairn's Imperial Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), Vol. VI, p. 91.