

## **ISAAC AND SAMSON: SONS OF THE PROMISES**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Among the dramatic interventions of the God of Israel stands a literary tradition that occurs rarely, but spans the Testaments; the accounts of the “sons of promise”. In its full form, it occurs only four times; in the accounts of Isaac (Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-21), Samson (Judges 13), John the Baptist (Luke 1: 5-24, 57-80), Jesus (Luke 1: 26-38, 2: 1-19). With the advent of Christianity, the images of the Baptist and Jesus preparing for and establishing the Kingdom of God became the focus of scholarship regarding this literary tradition and, consequently, Isaac and Samson were relegated to foundational types. However, our task herein will be to follow that which Luke, with his Gospel presentations, implies; to identify the importance of the accounts of Isaac and Samson in their own literary context. What was the original historical and theological significance of the accounts of Isaac and Samson, apart from the Christian understanding which casts them in the light of Jesus? In other words, what is the intrinsic importance of the birth accounts of Isaac and Samson that prompted Luke use this literary tradition to describe the birth of John and Jesus?

We propose that the key to understanding these accounts, particularly those of Isaac and Samson, lies in the rarity and context of their occurrences. Overall, these men and their birth accounts occur at critical junctures of the unfolding of Salvation History of Israel. These were moments in Salvation History that were transitional in its movement. Isaac, a Patriarch, was part of the foundation of the Abrahamic Covenant. Samson, a Judge, was a vital force in the Sinai Covenant forming the nation of Israel. John the Baptist, a Prophet formed the bridge between the Old Testament and the Messiah. Jesus, the Messiah, established the Kingdom of God and redefined Israel. Each man, reflected in his birth account, helped build the covenantal relationship between God and His people. We contend that the accounts of Isaac and Samson had a foundational role in early Christian Messianism, as often demonstrated by scholars, but were key figures in establishing the Davidic Kingship. Therefore, they had a historical role and significance apart from the Gospel, or Christian, interpretation that should be viewed as key elements of the earliest historical writings of the Bible which were generated by the Davidic royal court.

## **The Literary Form of the “Sons of Promise” Tradition**

Birth accounts in this tradition are filled with drama and emotion, as this type of intervention is set squarely in the human condition. Unlike God controlling the forces of nature or engaging the gods of other nations in a show of majesty and power, this intervention moves into the intimate life of a married couple. Children, particularly sons, were a desired product of the marital union. In ancient Israel, a large family was seen as a blessing from God (Psalm 127:3-5, 128: 2-4) and childlessness was seen as curse and a cause for great sorrow (Genesis 30:1, I Samuel 1:6).<sup>1</sup> Because such an intimate intervention is being depicted, the accounts contain strikingly sharp and personal details.

There are several common elements which are found in the “sons of promise” traditions:

- 1) A messenger or angel announces the forthcoming conception and birth of a son to childless couple
- 2) The role or commission of the son
- 3) An obstacle or objection to the announcement
- 4) The fulfillment of the promise.

This literary tradition is part of the theological concept of “promise”. Hebrew does not have a word to correspond to the modern conception of “promise”. It seems to be part of their authority which they attribute to the spoken word, *dabar*. To the Hebrew mind, the spoken word was a living and dynamic entity and that reflected the power of the speaker. Scholars, beginning with Martin Noth, have argued that “promise and fulfillment” is one of the great theologies that bind the books of the Torah and the Historical books together. McKenzie comments that “it is a basic article of OT faith that YHWH is able and willing to keep his promises, that He is faithful”.<sup>2</sup>

The form of the “sons of promise” accounts seems to owe much to, or have a common origin as, the ancient historical heroic traditions. G. Mobley, in an unparalleled study of the ancient traditions, points out that “birth stories, in terms of the sequence by which heroic biographical materials develop, are almost always secondary constructions”. He argues that “heroes acquire their reputations before they acquire the accounts” of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding their birth. He concludes that “birth episodes, and adventure episodes, though eventually combined, draw on conventions distinct to each respective genre and chronologically emerge in reverse sequence from their narrative arrangement.”<sup>3</sup> Mobley’s argument is powerful and compelling and, if we may infer, the sequence of the birth narratives to the accounts of the son of promise

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<sup>1</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1966) 129.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 693.

<sup>3</sup> G. Mobley, *The Empty Men* (NY: Doubleday, 2005) 175.

suggests that the birth narrative acted as an introduction and summary of the following traditions. Such a writing technique would have to be written by one who knows the outcome of the boy's life and can fashion a suitable introduction. Although birth accounts could have been fashioned long after the life of son of promise, as it would seem for Isaac, these accounts could also have been fashioned immediately upon the compilation of the traditions, as it seems in the case for Samson. The elements of the birth accounts are based on the boys' reputations, as Mobley argues, and the importance of the role for which he is remembered to which the various episodes and exploits became attached.

The Israelite heroic tradition is unique among the ancient accounts of heroes. Heroes such as Herakles, Achilles, and other such venerated figures have birth accounts which foreshadow their future exploits which grew into their own, self-contained, cycles of traditions. The Israelite heroic traditions do not stand on their own, but are parts of bigger historical presentations. In the Israelite mind, regardless of the actions of men, YHWH is the true warrior of Israel (Exodus 15:3). Even Samson sees his exploits subordinated to YHWH (Judges 15:18). More importantly, these heroic accounts are part of the depiction of Salvation History. Isaac and Samson were part of a historical saga which immediately culminated in the reign of David, while, according to Christianity, coming to final completion in the salvation which Jesus established.

There is another aspect, often overlooked, in these accounts; the importance of the fathers of the sons of promise. There are striking similarities between Abraham, Manoah, and Zechariah. John the Baptist must be included in this context. Jesus places John among the greatest of heroes in Israel's history (Matthew 11: 7-19, Luke 7: 24-35). John is recognized as opening the Old Testament canon, once thought closed. He is the embodied bridge connecting the men and theologies of the Old Testament to Jesus.<sup>4</sup> In each of these three instances, the father of the promised sons provides a significant context in which to gain a fuller understanding of the forthcoming son. These men were men of prominence. Abraham, based on Biblical and archaeological evidence, seems to have been a man of wealth that lived in the cosmopolitan city of Ur. Manoah is singled out by the text of Judges 13:2, with the phrase "a certain man". While this phrase could mean that he was singled out by God, it might be more likely that he was a man of influence in the clan of Dan, the remnants of the tribe that migrated northward.<sup>5</sup> This influence would explain why only his name is remembered in the birth account and the mother of Samson remains nameless. Zechariah was a Priest (Luke 1:5). Therefore, these men had social stature and status in their respective

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<sup>4</sup> This paradigm shifts with Mary and Jesus, which might be indicative of the "new Israel" that he was to establish through the Cross and Resurrection.

<sup>5</sup> This prominence may be suggested by the fact that Manoah's tomb, with that of Samson, has still been preserved in the region of Zorah.

settings. Their names were known to the local and nearby peoples. The circumstance of childlessness would also be known. To have a son, at an advanced age and after being deemed barren, would be considered extraordinary or miraculous. Such an event would generate numerous explanations and, therefore, account for various conflicts in details which seem to arise in these accounts. These men appear at key points in the formation of Israel and her faith in YHWH. The men serve transitional roles to move the history of Israel. In each account, the lion's share of interaction takes place with the father. His response to the announcement is given prominence, although the mother must bear and deliver the child. Abraham, Manoah, and Zechariah embody and depict YHWH as preparing for each new moment in the unfolding of the history of Israel. Seen across the expanse of the theology of the Testaments, the history of which they are a part culminates in Jesus the Christ. However, foundational to the Jesus Event was a more proximate completion of Abraham and Manoah, and the sons which were promised; the Kingship of David.

### **Davidic Writing**

The Kingship of David was foundational to the messianic line, "royal messianism", which Christianity argues was fulfilled in Jesus, called "son of David" (Matthew 1:1). However, David needed to establish a foundation for his throne, as religious leaders saw YHWH as the true King of Israel (Judges 8:23). David relied on the historical traditions of Israel to substantiate his claim on the throne.<sup>6</sup> The sweeping history produced under David has been called the "Israelite national epic" and is an "expression of the national consciousness of Israel which arose from the victories of David and the prosperity which his reign initiated". The narrative is "vivid and moves rapidly" and the "characters are depicted with an earthy realism". At its core is the principle that YHWH is the Lord of history. While beginning with the "fall of man" and the subsequent transgressions of humans, it develops a focus on the promises made to Abraham and "how the chosen family and its offspring are led through various adventures and dangers to settlement in the land of promise". As the events are narrated and the history unfolds, the "reader is left to conclude that the monarchy of David is the fulfillment of the saving promise". While primacy is given to the Tribe of Judah, the epic stresses the "unity of Israel".<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a common origin of the tribes is depicted. Herein lay the importance of the Patriarchs and the prominence of Isaac.

McKenzie argues that the epic was produced by the Davidic royal court, as part of his effort to unify Israel. Based on the continuation of themes throughout the books, it is most probable that "the history of early Israel and the history of the early monarchy were

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<sup>6</sup> This is an expansion of the classic "Documentary Hypothesis", popularized by J. Wellhausen in the late 1800's. In the terminology of the "hypothesis", this writing would be considered the J source.

<sup>7</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 656.

produced by the same school of writers.” The “institution and intention” of this writing should be attributed to David himself. In uniting Israel and Judah in his monarchy he wished the traditions of the tribes to be fused into a single tradition which would identify as one the nation which he had created and merge its dangerous diversities.”<sup>8</sup> Herein lay the importance of Samson, as he was a unifying force in the face of a common enemy. Furthermore, Samson was a Danite. Dan was a tribe which was originally given land in the South, but migrated northward (Judges 18). Additionally, many of Samson’s exploits involved Judahite territory (Judges 15: 9-13). Therefore, his connections spanned the expanse of Israel. This would serve as a prefiguring to David.

The Davidic court, like all royal scribes, served to compose and compile documents which “reflected how the rulers understood themselves and their role in society”. These documents “set forth a social image for public consumption . . . It defined what political, social, and religious issues were to be considered important”.<sup>9</sup> The chief way the Davidic court scribes presented this social image was to “incorporate traditions into written texts”.<sup>10</sup> This incorporation was part of the Davidic unification effort. Coote and Ord argue that this historical saga “could not have been composed earlier than David [and] it could not have been composed later than Solomon” because it speaks to a growing united kingdom of Israel and reveals no hint of the forthcoming split of the nation into the northern and southern kingdoms.<sup>11</sup> We would add that the points of emphasis that are narrated, particularly in the books of Judges and Samuel, point to a Davidic origin of the saga. The Philistines were a threat to the Israel of Samson and David, their power was broken by David and was not a viable threat to Solomon. Therefore, if this history was to reflect Solomon’s understanding of himself, the Philistines would not be given such a prominent role. More importantly, David was the last of the “charismatic” leaders, the men who had the “Spirit of the Lord” come upon them. While the kingship remained “charismatic”, as it succeeded David, the idea became part of the trappings of the kingly office.<sup>12</sup> The YHWH Spirit was no longer seen as the only hallmark of leadership, especially for the King. Authority now rested on dynastic succession. Coote and Ord propose an argument that supports our contention. They argue that this document contained issues that “we know were uppermost in the Davidic period”. They continue:

The purpose of the document “was to project an identity for the mix of peoples who became the state of Israel under Davidic rule and to give the cult of YHWH under David a sacral basis in history. [It] is a history of the world written by David’s scribes with the kingdom of David as its center and culmination. It is a

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 770.

<sup>9</sup> R. Coote/D. Ord, *The Bible’s First History* (Phil: Fortress, 1989) 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>12</sup> The great Biblical sociologist Max Weber calls this process “routinization”.

history in which the experiences, perceptions, and purposes of the ruling house of David in the time of David are set forth".<sup>13</sup>

The sons of promise, Isaac and Samson, are vital figures in this historical saga. The accounts of these men were not randomly chosen by the scribes, nor were they simply loosely grouped anecdotes and folktales. The traditions which were attached to Isaac and Samson were purposefully chosen, constituting anthologies centered on basic themes of covenant that were crucial to the kingship of David. In this way, these men helped to build the social image which David was setting forth, they were reflections of how David understood himself and his role in Israelite history, and they served as historical markers that pointed to the "center and culmination" of the history in which they were a part; the Davidic Kingship.

## ISAAC

Isaac is an enigmatic figure among the Patriarchs. We do not see the long narratives that characterize the Abraham and Jacob traditions in his traditions. This has prompted scholars to conjecture that the only information that survived about Isaac was genealogical and his traditions were attached to the name by later writers. However, his importance seems to be fundamental to the Yahwist faith. He is part of the, often invoked, patriarchal formula; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet, on his own "it seems that Isaac plays a role of little importance in the OT tradition" being cast as a "secondary personality alongside Abraham and Jacob".<sup>14</sup> While the traditions attached to Isaac are limited to Genesis 26, sometimes called the "Isaac cycle", it remains that Isaac is depicted as the "indispensable link that connects the history of Abraham to that of Jacob, the father of the tribes of Israel".<sup>15</sup> Although indispensable to the covenant, there is very little information about Isaac. It has been commented that Isaac inherited the possessions and promises of his father, Abraham, yet did not "take any noteworthy initiatives". Once the Abraham traditions end, with Abraham's death, the Isaac traditions seem to be subsumed into the Jacob traditions. The actual "Isaac cycle" of traditions seems to be a "composite" of traditions that became attached to the name but were, in actuality, generated "on the model of those stories narrated about Jacob and, above all, about Abraham". Therefore, the Biblical narrative seems to depict the major role, if not the only role, of Isaac being "his transmitting to his son a benefit that had come to him from his father: 'the promise' made to Abraham and which accompanied the first patriarch his whole life long".<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Coote/Ord, 29.

<sup>14</sup> R. Martin- Achard (Trans T. Prendergast), "Isaac", *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols (NY: Doubleday, 1992) 3:463.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:463.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3: 464.

That Isaac bore the Abrahamic Covenant and, therefore, was an integral link to the possession of the land of promise would be of sharp interest to the Davidic court. David was attempting to present himself as the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham with his accounts of settling the land. Therefore, the importance of Isaac in connection with the 12 Tribes of Israel, which David was working to unify, was to be a key moment in the Davidic history. Some recent scholars, such as Blum, have argued that the birth account is an etiology of Israel. This description builds on McKenzie's discussion which states, "the patriarchs- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph- are precursors of Israelite religion rather than its founders. . . Thus the patriarchs are presented as heroes of faith, but not as models of Israelite life and observance. The necessity of incorporating these precursors into Israelite tradition involves a . . . link between Israel and the land, which was a factor in the covenant".<sup>17</sup> He continues to argue that the traditions of the patriarchs constitute "what has to be called 'pre-Israelite' because the narrators in no way supposed that there was a tribal or national community called 'Israel' in this early period".<sup>18</sup> Some scholars have questioned the historical veracity of the genealogical link between Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but all scholars recognize its importance. The "connection was established as part of the literary unification of Israelite traditions. . . a product of the political unification of Israel under David".<sup>19</sup> The traditions of these patriarchs survived the centuries. Besides his name, little else of Isaac was remembered except that he, like his father and son, lived in the promised land of Canaan. This connection to the land "makes it possible for the history of the patriarchs to be one pole of the themes of promise and fulfillment".<sup>20</sup> The history of David was presented to provide the other pole; the fulfillment.

The importance of Isaac was not as apparent as that of Abraham or Jacob. This must have posed a difficult theological and historical problem for the Davidic court. Faced with a lack of traditions, the scribes emphasized the importance of Isaac through his birth account. Birth accounts, as we have suggested earlier, often served to introduce and summarize the life of the person, to prepare the reader for what is to follow. Without spinning tales from whole cloth, the scribes appealed to common theology in depicting the birth of Isaac. To the Israelite mindset, "the unannounced event was not significant. They believed that YHWH governed their history; they believed that he owed it to himself, to Israel, and to others to make it known when he performed a significant action".<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (NY: Image, 1974) 71-72.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-148.

One notices the lengthy structure of the birth account of Isaac; beginning in Genesis 18:1-15, interrupted with related traditions, and completing in 21:1-8. C. Schedl comments;

“This long course of preparation has a deeper theological import: it is to be made abundantly and inevitably clear that it is God’s hand that is at work in the birth of Isaac. It is God who is responsible for this new and unheard of wonder: a barren woman, advanced in years, gives birth to a son. It is God who made laughter for Sarah (21,6).<sup>22</sup>

Schedl makes a powerful observation about a, frequently, overlooked aspect of “promise-fulfillment”. Within the arc of promise-fulfillment is preparation. This is introduced by the elongated birth account of Isaac and was elevated to the key theme throughout his traditions. The idea of preparation depicts history being unfolded, by God, in a deliberate and purposeful manner. The sons of promise were not random choices, but chosen to be foundational to the fulfillment of the promises. After an inexorable process of preparation, David is depicted as the product and result of that preparation. Therefore, based on the juxtaposition of related accounts, the lengthy and unspecific details regarding Isaac, and the expanded depiction of promise-fulfillment, we propose that the Isaac birth account was the original form of the, uniquely, Israelite form of this type of “heroic birth”.

## **SAMSON**

The birth account of Samson, while having the same elements and general pattern as the Isaac account, is much more detailed regarding the boy himself. This could be a result of the time between Isaac and David and the time between Samson and David. The latter being much shorter which would allow for more details of the tradition to survive in popular circulation. Like the Isaac account, we are introduced to a massive context. In Isaac, we have the original Abrahamic Covenant, and in Samson we have the transgression of the Mosaic Covenant and the foreboding threat of the Philistines. Within the original promises, we see the saga of one man- Abraham, and in the Samson account the focus is placed on a “certain man”- Manoah, residing in the clan of Dan amidst the growing Philistine menace. It is ancient narration at its best; from a panoramic backdrop to an individual person. The drama is apparent and can not be overstated.

However, unlike Isaac, who seemed to simply be the vessel of the transmission of the Abrahamic Covenant, the role of Samson is very specific and matches the expanse of the threat posed by the Philistines. The birth account, deferring to the patriarchal society of the time, emphasizes the dialogue between Manoah and the messenger even

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<sup>22</sup> Schedl, C. *History of the Old Testament* (NY: Alba House, 1972) 2: 42-43.

though the messenger appears to the wife first. Throughout the announcement text, the conditions and details pertaining to the forthcoming son occur three times and vary with each recounting. We see the initial visit (Judges 13:3-5), the wife's retelling to Manoah (13:7), and a summary to Manoah (13: 13-14).

The first visit is the most important, and the most detailed regarding the son. Herein we see the unique status of the son, a nazirite, joined to the role he is to play, to being the deliverance of the Israel from the hand of the Philistines. The term "nazir" or "nazirite" refers to a person who is set apart or separated. It may apply to one who is of high rank. More specifically, it refers to a consecrated person or thing, one that is removed from profane or everyday life. There is a connotation of elevation, beyond the commonplace, in that the person or thing is dedicated or set aside for a special role. While the semantic field, eventually, expanded to include terms such as "crown" or "prince", or some form of nobility, it is generally accepted that all forms and developments derive from the original root, *nzr*, meaning "separation".<sup>23</sup>

The role of the boy is stated precisely; to begin the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines. The term for begin, *hll*, might be etilogically connected to a root meaning that connotes "to bore" or "opening wedge". D. Wiseman has illustrated how this term is used in three contexts; first in a series of occurrences or on the outset of journey or first in the order of attack, a specified time, or an abstract "first principle of wisdom".<sup>24</sup> One can easily see the original meanings and Wiseman's first context in direct application to Samson. Samson was the first of the series of decisive attacks on the Philistines, boring in to their domination and providing the opening which David completed. F. Maass argues that the term belongs to a "root represented in the whole semitic linguistic realm with the original meaning 'to loose, set free'".<sup>25</sup> The relationship to the root meaning of "to bore/opening wedge" becomes evident when viewed in the overall linguistic context; the term refers to a first action in a process which will end in freedom. Significantly, forms of this root occur four times in the Samson narratives. Here, in Judges 13:5 to initiate the steps in deliverance. It occurs in Judges 13:25, in an epilogue, of sorts, to the fulfillment of the promise; that the boy was born and named. Noteworthy is the fact this verse also narrates Samson's first charismatic episode, wherein the Spirit of the Lord rushes upon him. It is tied to the birth account, and his uncut hair, by proximity. Moreover, it is a different construction that the following references to the onrush of the Spirit; Judges 14:6, 19, 15:14. This first episode is in

<sup>23</sup> Cf. McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 608,

T. McComiskey, "nazar", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2: 567-568, S. Schwertner, "consecrated person", *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2: 727-729.

<sup>24</sup> D. Wiseman, "beginning, first", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:290.

<sup>25</sup> F. Maass, "to desecrate", *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 1:427.

Danite territory. Most likely, the Judahite Davidic scribes kept the unique construction in the birth account to introduce the concept of long term charisma, as the previous Judges were remembered as having temporary charismatic endowments.<sup>26</sup> The following three charismatic episodes are in Judahite territory and the construction of the references is unique to the Saul and Davidic narratives. Therefore, Judges 13:25 serves as an introduction to the following charismatic episodes and his career. Forms of the root term, “begin”, also occur in Judges 16:19 and 22, both in references regarding his hair. The distribution of references to his hair seems to suggest a redaction by the Davidic court. We see specific mention of the hair being tied to deliverance conspicuously absent from the second and third versions of the preparations. The difference in descriptions of the charisma suggests different origins and purposes; possibly, the memory of his nazirite status was preserved among the Danites whereas the charismatic warrior was a memory from the Judahites. Therefore, it seems as the Davidic scribes kept the references to Samson’s hair as a foundation, and narrative framework, for the charisma which anticipated the Judahite King David.<sup>27</sup>

The term “begin” finds support in the description of what process the boy will start; deliverance. The term used for deliverance, *yasha*, has root meanings of “open, wide, free”. The connotations extend to concepts such as deliverance and vengeance. It is also the root for the word, and concept of “salvation”. According to McKenzie, the Hebrew root and “its derivatives appear to signify primarily the possession of space and the freedom and security which is gained by the removal of constriction”. That the term is used for a son of promise illustrates that “YHWH does save through human means, but it is clearly understood that he raises men to be saviors and empowers them to save. . . the judges of Israel are saviors, and the same conception is transferred to the king in the beginning of the monarchy”.<sup>28</sup> Included in the concept is the freedom from distress and the ability to pursue one’s own objectives. Therefore, “to move from distress to safety requires deliverance. Generally, the deliverance must come from somewhere outside the party oppressed”.<sup>29</sup> Samson, according to the words of the angel, stood separate- as a Nazirite, from the rest of the Israelites.<sup>30</sup> E. Stolz suggests that an early form of “messiah”, a derivative of *yasha*, may have been the original title of the delivering Judges. The term “judge”, *shophet*, may have replaced the original title in

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<sup>26</sup> A permanent charisma would prefigure that charisma of David (1 Samuel 16:13).

<sup>27</sup> A similar argument is proposed by H.W. Hertzberg; that as a consecrated Nazirite, Samson was always open to timely interventions of the Spirit. Cf. Hertzberg, H.W. *Die Bücher Josua, Richter, Ruth* ATD 9 Göttingen, 1985.

<sup>28</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 760.

<sup>29</sup> J. Hartley, “salvation”, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 2 vols (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 1:414.

<sup>30</sup> G. Mobley offers related discussions to our point. Cf. *The Empty Men* (NY: Doubleday 2005), *Samson and the Liminal Hero* (NY: T&T Clark, 2006). Herein he describes how Samson, and others, were on the outskirts of Israelite society and yet had a lasting impact on the growth of the society. Both works are stellar and unparalleled in their presentations.

the Davidic compilation.<sup>31</sup> We would suggest that the replacement was made because the term, *shophet*, was more inclusive and could apply to the administrative, or minor, Judges as well. Therefore, the first birth announcement contains a doubled description of the role the boy is to serve. In both of the terms, which are coupled together, the idea of obtaining freedom for Israel is foundational.

The coupling of the nazirite status and the mission is another textual indicator that this account was written in the early monarchy, during the Davidic reign. The title “nazirite” is derived from Numbers 6, which narrates a code of laws for ascetic devotion. There is general agreement among scholars that this code was written long after the Davidic reign and was, most likely, the product of Priestly writing. To apply such an ascetic devotion to Samson is a futile task and an unproductive theory. However, we would propose that the dietary laws and uncut hair depict an early form of the devotion. Furthermore, this seems to be a final stage in the development of the concept of the “holy warrior”.<sup>32</sup> Schedl argues that “the origins of the naziricy are perhaps to be sought in the concept of sacred war, in which certain individuals dedicated themselves by a vow, which was extremely recognizable in their flowing hair, to wage unconditional war against the enemies of YHWH. This warlike ideal was transformed by the Law into an ascetic concept”.<sup>33</sup> McKenzie, following G. von Rad, points out that “the holy war was a cultic act” and part of the consecration included sexual abstinence and uncut hair.<sup>34</sup> After this status is described, the angel tells the mission that the boy is to fulfill; to begin the deliverance of Israel. He is not to liberate Israel completely; this is to be the work of David. Here again, we see a textual indicator of Davidic writing; David is to complete the work that Samson was to begin. More importantly, the breaking of the Philistine domination over the region would resonate most strongly in the Davidic kingship, as the Philistines were of little historical consequence after the Davidic Kingship.<sup>35</sup>

The second version of the conditions comes from the wife, telling Manoah. Curiously, the speech of the mother ends at the religious status of the boy, with no mention of deliverance. There is slight variance in the details that holds significance. In the original

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<sup>31</sup> E. Stolz, “to help”, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* 3 vols (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997) 2:587.

<sup>32</sup> The “Holy War” practice was still known in the time of David, as shown in the events surrounding Uriah the Hittite (1 Samuel 11). Also, once a standing army was generated, the need for such warriors diminished.

<sup>33</sup> Schedl, 3:11.

<sup>34</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *The Old Testament Without Illusion* (Chicago: Thomas More, 1979). 212. The text suggests some sexual dalliances on Samson’s part, which seems to be a departure from the battlefield nazir, and Judges 16 reads that his hair was in 7 braids. We would propose that the seven braids were a sign of personal devotion, as the root of “seven” seems to mean “oath”. Also, since he was a life long nazirite the braids may have simply been more functional

<sup>35</sup> Many students of the Bible comment that Samson’s mission failed, but Biblical history shows that it was triumphant. He halted the Philistine rise to power in the region, which allowed Samuel and Saul to fortify Israel against the advent of the inevitable regrouping and second wave of attacks by the Philistines and allowed David to break their power.

form, the boy was to be a nazirite from birth. In this form, he is to be a nazirite for his entire life. Usually, the vow is temporary. Samson is the only lifelong nazirite in the Old Testament. It is unclear if the mother has added this detail or is it the Davidic author foreshadowing that Samson will die in a consecrated state. In either instance, the aspect adds an element of permanence to the mission and role of Samson; an aspect which David will seize upon to support his kingship. The restrictions being retold pertain only to the mother, the uncut hair is not mentioned, nor is the boy's mission. Likewise, in the third version, the restrictions on the mother are emphasized. Nothing is said of the boy and his mission, which was the subject of Manoah's question. The idea of uncut hair and deliverance fades from the narration and is conspicuous by its absence. After forty years of oppression, we can assume that the news of deliverance would be joyous news and be welcomed and be the theme which runs throughout each retelling. We would propose that this anomalous omission is the result of purposeful editing of the Davidic scribes. The emphasis on the uncut hair may have been edited out of the birth account, and later episodes, after the initial compilation in order not to foreshadow or glorify the memory of Absalom, whose story appears throughout 2 Samuel, and his famous hair. To emphasize the link between hair and deliverance in the Samson narratives could give David's political enemies an opportunity to challenge the legitimacy of the Davidic throne.<sup>36</sup> The compilers are careful to avoid Samson's hair during the narration of his death.<sup>37</sup> The connection between Samson's hair and Israel's deliverance were kept in the instances wherein it was too embedded in the traditions to omit.

In Judges 13:24, we read of the fulfillment of the promise; Samson is born. Unlike in Genesis 21, wherein we see little about Isaac except that he will be the vessel through which God completes his promises to Abraham, we read that Samson grew and was blessed. The idea of being blessed by God adds further support to the idea that Samson is separate unto God. The Hebrew theology saw blessing as "communication of life from YHWH" and "with life come vigor and strength and success".<sup>38</sup> Here is the mark of Samson's role; his strength. In his strength, a result of this blessing, his consecration and charisma are joined, as this comment acts as a bridge between the

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<sup>36</sup> David had, at least, three political factions that were opposed to his reign and would seize upon this opportunity: the Saulides, who would argue that David appropriated the image of Samson even though Samson could be seen to have prefigured Saul in significant ways; the anti-monarchists, who would argue that even the strongest and consecrated judge could not provide lasting protection; the allies of Absalom, who would argue that Samson prefigured Absalom and he is the rightful King of Israel.

<sup>37</sup> As Samson stood between the pillars, the text does not mention either the Charisma, an onrush of the Spirit of the Lord, or his consecrated hair despite the emphasis on his hair throughout the Delilah account.. He is presented as standing alone in his faith. The only hint of his naziricity is in Judges 16:22, which tells of his hair growing back. Originally, this could have signaled the start of a new state of consecration or sanctification, as the Holy Warriors underwent. His prayer marks his readiness for one last battle, as Holy Warriors consulted with God before acting. Without a reference to the consecration, 16:22 is relegated to a literary marker of hope.

<sup>38</sup> McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 98.

naziritic status conferred on the boy and his first charismatic episode. Unlike Isaac, whose role was somewhat passive, the role of Samson will be to actively wage war on the Philistines with physical prowess and strength. With this blessing, Samson's successful role in Salvation is assured.

### **The Davidic Origins**

The birth accounts of Isaac and Samson, as "sons of promise" bear many similarities to the heroic traditions of the Ancient Near East. However, as we have pointed out, the figures of Isaac and Samson belong to a larger historical saga or epic. G. Rendsburg discusses a "unified effort to produce Israel's national epic". In arguing in a way similar to McKenzie, Rendsburg proposes that this epic was produced "by a culture that was comfortable with incorporating disparate traditions" rather than trying to force all traditions and memories into one "irreducible truth".<sup>39</sup> The idea of national unification brought about many societal changes that needed support. David and his court appealed to the founding fathers of Israel; the Patriarchs and the heroes of the subsequent generations. Rendsburg comments:

"Stories about these heroes circulated earlier. But they did cast older traditions in a new light. Everything was seen through the filter of Davidic-Solomonic rule. All of the monarchy's developments were anticipated in hoary antiquity, and all were sanctioned by God. Kingship, power, acceptance of a Jerusalemite priest, supremacy of the youngest son- all were divinely approved since the beginning".<sup>40</sup>

In this compilation, and redaction, process the birth accounts of Isaac and Samson rose to prominence. It seems likely that the original, distinctive, "Israelite" form of the "sons of promise" traditions were composed in the Davidic court. With the Isaac account, we could be seeing the first version of this type of account. The pattern, somewhat fragmented in Isaac, was to be followed by the birth account of Samson. The replicative nature of the account of Isaac could be, in part, attributed to the considerable length of time between his life and the Davidic court and surviving references had to be expanded. The life of Samson was in closer proximity to the Davidic court. Therefore, redacting, not expanding, was needed to produce a coherent account.

Both Isaac and Samson, and their birth accounts, illustrated the Davidic theology. Both men were depicted as visible representatives of the covenantal promises; Isaac, the Abrahamic Covenant, and Samson, the Mosaic Covenant. Each man was presented as

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<sup>39</sup> G. Rendsburg, "Reading David in Genesis", *Bible Review* XVII # 1 (February 2001) 23.

<sup>40</sup> Rendsburg, 33.

embodying the words of promise and covenant given to the mediators of the covenants, Abraham and Moses. Yet, while each man embodied the Covenant, each man's role had a forward orientation which looked ahead to a new stage in the unfolding of Israel's Salvation History.<sup>41</sup> Isaac, following the words of McKenzie, was a foundational figure in the prehistory of the faith. Samson, though separated to and by God, was a foundational figure in the prehistory of the nation. During his reign, David tried to forge together the religious and national interests of Israel, embodied by Isaac and Samson. Therefore, these two men were given a literary form that set them apart from the other great figures of the early history of Israel and prepared the way for David. David did not need such a birth account. He was not the bearer of the covenantal promises, he was the completion and fulfillment of the promises.

## CONCLUSION

The birth accounts of Isaac and Samson share a similar construction and orientation when viewed through a Davidic context. Each are anthologies, narratives grouped around a common concept or theme. While they each have worth on their own, they provide vital and integral historical marks when placed within the Davidic epic. The narratives of Isaac comprised an anthology of patriarchal traditions, wrapped around a core of foundational promises to Abraham. The narratives of Samson comprised an anthology of heroism wrapped around a core of Divine deliverance of the Israelite nation. Each man's birth account, not created from whole cloth, were surviving traditions that were compiled and presented, by the Davidic scribes, to serve as an introduction and summary of the narratives which were to follow and the singular importance of each man, Isaac and Samson, in the unfolding of Israelite History.

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<sup>41</sup> The same could be said for the succession of John and Jesus; John embodied and fulfilled the OT and looked to the Messiah, Jesus embodied and fulfilled the Messianic prophecies and looked to the establishment of the Kingdom, the New Israel.

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