

Samson's Last Laugh: The Š/ŠHQ Pun in Judges 16:25–27

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Scholars are well aware of the frequent use of puns in the Bible as well as the abundance of rhetorical features in the book of Judges.¹ However, a pun embedded within the Samson story remains underappreciated. In Judges 16, Samson goes to Gaza, where he meets a promiscuous woman, Delilah. The locals plot against Samson and convince Delilah to discover and reveal the source of his strength. After quite a bit of nagging, Delilah finally learns Samson's secret, disables his power, and hands him over to the Philistines. While what happens next is frightfully shocking to a modern audience, Samson's treatment at the hand of his captors was all too common in the ancient world.² The Philistines gouge out his eyes, and he is forced to grind grain while in captivity. An indeterminate amount of time passes (enough for Samson's hair to begin sprouting back), and then the Philistine leaders decide to bring Samson to a grand feast at which the participants are drunk (טוב לבם).

At this point, almost all translations, both ancient and modern, render the next section with a variation of the following (Judg 16:25–27):

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¹ See, e.g., *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (ed. Scott B. Noegel; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2000); and Yairah Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (trans. Jonathan Chipman; Biblical Interpretation Series 38; Leiden: Brill, 1999; Hebrew original, *Biblical Encyclopaedia Library* 6; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1992). More recently, see Gregory T. K. Wong, *Compositional Strategy of the Book of Judges: An Inductive, Rhetorical Study* (VTSup 111; Leiden: Brill, 2006).

² Karel van der Toorn, "Judges xvi 21 in the Light of the Akkadian Sources," *VT* 36 (1986): 248–53.

The celebrants said, “Summon Samson so that he might entertain us” [וישחק] . . . then he performed for them [ויצחק] . . . the temple was filled with men and women and all the leaders of the Philistines were there and upon the roof were around 3,000 men and women, all watching while Samson was performing [בשחוק].

This translation is perfectly warranted, as it follows the masoretic tradition of pointing the first radical of שחק as a *sin* yielding שחק. However, if the first consonant of this word is read as a *shin* a radically different translation results.

The grapheme שחק represents two distinct roots in Northwest Semitic languages. The root שחק has the basic meaning “to crush.”³ On the other hand, שחק means “to laugh.” Although these meanings are easily distinguishable in theory, there is occasional difficulty delineating between שחק and שחק in the interpretation of inscriptional material.⁴ This modern phenomenon might illustrate the potential for ancient authors to exploit an apparent ambiguity as the two roots share a common grapheme. An inscription from Hatra (no. 232:2) that includes the grapheme *shqth* may attest one of these roots.⁵ A similar construction appears also two other times in Hatran inscriptions (23:3 and 125:3) and the orthographic readings of these texts are much more certain than the previous instance. There is much debate, however, on whether these instances should be translated as “he smiled at him kindly”⁶ from שחק, or “he hurt him” from שחק.⁷

³ For instance, *shq* appears in Syriac in the G, Gt, and D stems with the basic meaning “to grind or crush” (Stephen A. Kaufman, “Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon,” online: <http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/>). In Ugaritic *shq* appears only in connection with a toponym (Gregorio del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* [HdO 67; Leiden: Brill, 2003], 812). For the various alphabetic and syllabic spellings, see Wilfred van Soldt, “Studies in the Topography of Ugarit (1): The Spelling of the Ugaritic Toponyms,” *UF* 28 (1996): 686. For treatments of the location of the *Šahaqu*, see Wilfred van Soldt, “Studies in the Topography of Ugarit (3): Groups of Towns and Their Locations,” *UF* 30 (1998): 725–26.

⁴ See *HALOT*, 1465; and *DNWSI*, s.v. *shq*₂, 1121–22.

⁵ André Caquot translates *shqth* as “*l'endommagerait*” (“Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes de Hatra [V],” *Syria* 40 [1963]: 15; idem, “Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes de Hatra [VI],” *Syria* 41 [1964]: 256). The editor of the *editio princeps*, Fuad Safar, indicates that the reading of *h* is uncertain (“Hatra Inscriptions” [in Arabic], *Sumer* 24 [1968]: 10 n. 9). Furthermore, some scholars translate this word as “smiled,” e.g., Rainer Degen, “New Inscriptions from Hatra (NOS. 231–280),” *JEOL* 23 (1973–74): 405. For an introduction to the study of these inscriptions, see Basile Aggoula, *Inventaire des inscriptions Hatréennes* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1991).

⁶ Harald Ingholt, “IV. Palmyrene-Hatran-Nabatean,” in *An Aramaic Handbook, with Contributions by Z. Ben-Hayyim [and others]* (ed. Franz Rosenthal; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967), 50.

⁷ Caquot, “Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes de Hatra (V),” 15; idem, “Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes de Hatra (VI),” 256.

In Biblical Hebrew, שחַק and its allomorph שַׁחַק⁸ are quite common and have the meanings “to laugh” (G) and “to joke, entertain” (D).⁹ However, שחַק, “to crush,” occurs only four times in the Hebrew Bible. Exodus 30:36 states: “Crush [ושחַקת] some of it [incense] to powder [הדק] and place some of it before the tent of meeting.” Job 14:19 uses this root to portray water eroding stones.¹⁰ The text most relevant to Judg 16:25–27 is 2 Sam 22:43 (note the parallel text Ps 18:43): “I shall crush them [ושחַקם] as fine as dust of the earth, as mud of the street I shall pulverize them [אדקם], I shall flatten them [ארקעם].” In this line, שחַק is used as a synonym for two other words, דקק and רקע. Biblical authors used דקק to depict the violent destruction of cultic sites by burning sacred objects and crushing the ashes (Exod 32:20; Deut 9:21; 2 Kgs 23:6, 15). רקע is used to describe an artisan flattening metal (Exod 9:3; Num 16:38, 39). Like its synonyms, שחַק can indicate a violent crushing or flattening. Admittedly, apart from the passage in Judges, שחַק is not used in connection with human beings; however, this is exactly one of the ways puns are used: applying lexemes with similar sounds to new and unexpected contexts in order to produce irony.

The author of the pericope in Judges forms a pun by providing an ironic situation in which both of the meanings of *šḥq* and *šḥq* perfectly fit the context of 16:25–27. There is no orthographic difference between these two roots in an unvocalized text, and this leads to graphical ambiguity, which facilitates this pun. In addition to graphical ambiguity, these two roots also share a close phonetic similarity. The consonants *š* and *ś* are often undifferentiated in certain Semitic writing systems, and at times these sounds interchange between analogues in different languages. In Ugaritic both *š* and *ś* coalesced into *š*, as seen in Ugaritic *bšr*, “flesh” (Hebrew *bśr*).¹¹ In Biblical Hebrew *s*, *š*, and *ś* were no doubt different sounds at the time the Phoenician alphabet was borrowed, but apparently the difference in pronunciation between the sounds did not warrant the addition of a distinct symbol.¹² Furthermore, there are instances in which sibilants overlap, such as שבבכה, “net, lattice-work,” and סבך, “to entangle, entwine.” The “shibboleth incident” in Judg

⁸ See Athalya Brenner’s study of these two roots: “On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament,” in *On Humour and Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Yehuda A. Radday and Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 46–52.

⁹ HALOT, 1315–16 and 1019, respectively. In Ugaritic *šḥq* shares this same meaning (del Olmo Lete and Sanmartín, *Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language*, 782).

¹⁰ This usage is similar to that of its Akkadian analogue, *šēqu*, which means “to polish or make smooth (by rubbing or crushing)”; see *AHW*, 1215b.

¹¹ Josef Tropper, *Ugaritische Grammatik* (AOAT 273; Münster: Ugarit, 2000), §§32.122 and 32.143.5. This phenomenon occurs also in Amurrite; see Sabatino Moscati, Anton Spitaler, Edward Ullendorff, and Wolfram von Soden, *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of Semitic Languages: Phonology and Morphology* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1969), §§8.29 and 8.33.

¹² Joüon-Muraoka, §5m.

12:6 is the most famous example of sibilant interchange in the Bible.¹³ To be sure, the book of Judges contains examples of the skillful use of linguistic humor.¹⁴ These phenomena demonstrate both that the sounds of the Hebrew sibilants were similar enough to facilitate the pun in Judg 16:25, 27 and that linguistic humor is a prominent aspect in certain accounts in the book of Judges.

The author of this pericope used the ambiguity of the verb in Judg 16:25, 27 to articulate two points of view. The masoretic tradents follow the perspective of the festive Philistines as they vocalized קחשׁ to convey the notion that Samson's captors brought him into the temple in order to entertain them. The second point of view is that of the narrator. The narrator injects an element of dark comedy into this account stating that the Philistines summoned Samson in order to crush themselves. Like other figures in the Bible, Samson destroyed a pagan sanctuary and crushed the cultic idols to bits. This time, however, the crushed cultic objects were the Philistine men and women.

The biblical writers often enjoyed humor at the expense of the Philistines, as seen in the account of the mice and *membra virile* offerings in 1 Samuel 5.¹⁵ Furthermore, the pun in Judg 16:25–27 is made all the more apparent by the fact that the author purposely picked the unambiguous allomorph *shq* instead of *shq* in Judg 16:26 when Samson is performing for the crowd.¹⁶ The use of *shq* between the two occurrences *s/shq* is a cue to the reader/hearer, pointing out the presence of the pun and concomitantly the narrator's point of view. While the Philistines thought they were summoning Samson for their entertainment, they were ushering in their brutal death as he crushed them under the collapsing temple. Through a subtle use of puns, the author of this pericope indicates that it was Samson who had the last laugh.

¹³ E. A. Speiser, "The Shibboleth Incident (Judges 12:6)," in *Oriental and Biblical Studies: Collected Writings of E. A. Speiser* (ed. J. J. Finkelstein and Moshe Greenberg; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967), 143–50.

¹⁴ For example, the book of Judges contains puns relating to names including Eglon, "Big Calf" (3:17), and Cushan-Rishathaim, "Superblack Double-villain" (3:18); for a treatment of the humorous aspect of these names, see Yehuda T. Radday, "Humour in Names" in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Radday and Brenner, 63.

¹⁵ Aren Maeir, "A New Interpretation of the Term 'Opalim (עפלים) in Light of Recent Archaeological Finds from Philistia," *JSOT* 32 (2007): 23–40.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of these two allomorphs, see Rudiger Bartelmus, "šāḥaq/šāḥaq," *TWAT* 7:730–46.