WHO CUT SAMSON’S HAIR?

THE INTERPRETATION OF JUDGES 16:19A RECONSIDERED

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1. INTRODUCTION

Who cut Samson's hair? Delilah or some man? Judges 16, the final chapter of the Samson cycle which narrates how Samson could be overpowered by the Philistines through Delilah, allows both interpretations. This does not mean, however, that both are equally plausible. As we shall see, the second interpretation is more fitting in the supposed circumstances.

The relevant text for answering the question raised is found in Judg 16:19. In the Hebrew Bible it runs as follows:

ותישׁנהו על־ברכיה ותקרא לאישׁ ותגלח את־שׁבע מחלפות ראשׁו

By 'literal' translating, it can be rendered in the following way:

And she (Delilah) made him (Samson) sleep upon her knees; and she called for the man and she cut the seven locks of his head.

Or: and she had him cut the seven locks of his head.

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1 I am indebted to Rev. Jaap Faber, Kampen, the Netherlands, for correcting the English of this article at a number of points.
2 In this context קרא + ל means (cf. Judg 4:6, 16:25 and see, e.g., Exod 1:18, 7:11, 8:4, 21), ‘to summon’, ‘to bring out’ (possibly by her personal handmaid [cf. Exod 2:5, Dan 13:15,17–19,36 (Vulgate)]).
3 For such a translation and translations which allow this interpretation, see, e.g., the African Die Bybel in Afrikaans (1936), the German Einheitsübersetzung der Heiligen Schrift (1980), the French La Sainte Bible (Nouvelle version Segond révisée [1989]), the Dutch De Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling (2004) and Naardense Bijbel (2004), the German Bibel in gerechter Sprache (2006).
4 ראשׁו מהלפת שׁבע (cf. also Judg 13:16); meant are Samson's long plaits of black hair falling down on his back. ראשׁ (cf. also Judg 13:5, 16:17) is metonymically used for the hair of the head, the head-dress. Cf. also ראשׁ in Judg 16:22 and the use of ראשׁ as object of גלח in, for instance, Lev 14:9, Num 6:9, Deut 21:12, 2 Sam 14:26, Isa 7:20, Ezek 44:20. Cf. Dhorme 1963, 41f.
5 For this and similar translations see, e.g., the King James Version (1611), the Dutch 'national' Bible, the Statenvertaling (1637), the Dutch translation of J. H. van der Palm (1819), the Dutch Vertaling 1951 van het Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, The New American Standard Bible (1960), The New Revised Standard Version (1989).
The role of the man—usually translated as a man⁶ viz. the man who had been instructed by Delilah before—is not clear in itself. To all appearance it concerns either a servant of Delilah or the man or one of the men who were lying in wait in the interior chamber (cf. Judg 16:9, 12, 21)⁷ or, if desired, the barber invited for the occasion (see below). For which purpose the man was summoned, is not told, however. Because Samson had made known that a knife, a razor (דרור [Judg 16:17; cf. Judg 13:5, 1 Sam 1:11]) is the thing which will be fatal for him, it is likely that such an instrument, a sharp utensil (cf. Ezek 5:1, Ps 52:4),⁸ had been the object through which Samson had been robbed of his hair. Consequently the man can be considered to be the person who brought Delilah the razor, which was then used by her to cut Samson’s hair.⁹ But it is also possible to regard the man as someone who armed with the razor cut Samson’s hair by order of Delilah. In both instances Delilah is responsible in full, in the first instance very directly, in the second instance indirectly through an intermediary.

2. To Cut or To Have Cut?

As pointed out, קלח can be translated with ‘she cut’ or with ‘she had him cut’. In the latter case it is not necessary to ascribe causative force to קלח pi.¹⁰ More often someone who is responsible for an action is mentioned as the subject of the action without executing it personally. Of Solomon, for instance, it is narrated that he built the house of the Lord (1 Kgs 6:1f.). Actually he took the initiative in building the temple and had others build it (cf. 1 Kgs 5:7–18). According to Exodus 25–40 Moses had been instructed by the Lord to make the tabernacle and its inventory (עשה [Exod 25:11,13,17,18 etc.]; והנה [Exod 25:18,29, 26:1,4,5 etc.]).

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⁶ Cf., e.g., Jouën and Muraoka 1991, § 137n; Waltke and O’Connor 1990, § 13.5,1e.
⁷ In Judg 16:9, 12 the participle singular is used. Generally it is understood as a collective.
⁸ For indicating the razor in Ezek 5:1, Ps 52:4, and in for instance Num 6:9, 8:7 the term קPDO is used. According to Ehrlich 1910, 140f., the corpus delicti, the knife, had been explicitly mentioned in the original text of Judges 16. Instead of קPDO he reads לוסף: Delilah called for a razor.
⁹ For the knife, razor see Dalman 1937, 10, 268, 271; Weippert 1977, 218f.
¹⁰ For the Old Testament use see Botterweck 1977, 5–20. For the interpretation of קלח as causative see Fensham 1959, 97–98. According to Fensham קלח pi. was predominantly used as causative. There is, however, an important difference between texts as Num 6:9, 18 etc. and Judg 16:9. In Num 6:9,18 etc. a person shaves himself or has himself shaved; in Judg 16:9 a person shaves another person or has another person shaved.