In this paper I will study the occurrences of Samson in early Islamic literature and compare how Samson is portrayed there with his portrayal in the Old Testament.

Samson is mentioned sparsely in the Islamic literature. He is not mentioned in the Qur'an but occurs in Arabic historiography of 'Umāra Ibn Wathīma al-Fārisi (d. 902), Kitāb Bad' al-Khalq wa-Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā' (Book of the Beginning and of the Prophets); Abū Ja'far Ibn Jarir Al-Ṭabarī (839–923) Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk (The History of Rulers and Kings), Abū Ishāq al-Ta'labī (?–d. 1036), ‘Arāʾis al-majālis fī qīṣāṣ Al-Anbiyāʾ (Lives of the Prophets),1 Kamal al Din Muhammad Ibn Mūsā al-Damīrī (1344–1405) in his Hayāt al-Ḥayawān al-Kubrá (Greater Life of Animals).2 But the oldest reference is from Ahmad Ibn Ya’qub Ibn Wahb Ibn Wādīh al-Ya’qūbī (?–d. 897), Ta'rīkh ibn Wādīh, which is known as “the first universal story in Muslim literature” (Tottoli 2002, 132).

Al-Ya’qūbī only makes a very brief mention of Samson: “after Alankasas who suppressed them for 40 years Shamsun came at their head, 20 years. Subsequently they remained without a ruler for 12 years. Then Eli the high priest came at their head for 40 years”. His source was the Old Testament; according to G. Smit it was the Peshitta version of the Old Testament, more particularly the Jacob of Edessa edition (Smit 1907, 127). The information given by Al-Yaqūbī that Samson ruled for 20 years is indeed in accordance with the biblical account and nothing more is mentioned. This is in accordance with Al-Yaqūbī’s usual method: he treats the material of the book of Genesis rather extensively, but the following sections on Moses, the prophets up to the story of Jesus, and the early Christians

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1 Literary Tales of the Prophets.
2 This works treats in alphabetical order 931 animals mentioned in the Qur’ān, and poetical en proverbial Arab literature. It is a compilation of the work of over 700 authors.
(Paul) are treated progressively more briefly, often in a chronistic style as we have here with Samson. One detail however deserves our attention: according to Al-Yaqūbī Israel remained without a ruler for 12 years after Samson. In the OT the episode of Samson is followed by Judges 16–17 on Micha the priest and chapters 18–21 on the outrage at Gibeah. In these five last chapters of Judges it is often repeated that “there was no king in Israel, everybody did what was right in his own eyes”. This is probably reflected in Al-Yaqūbī’s statement that Israel remained without a ruler until the rule of Eli, the high priest. Al-Yaqūbī’s reference to a period of 12 years without a ruler probably indicates the chaotic time narrated in Judges 17–21.

‘Umāra Ibn Wathima collected stories (qīṣāṣ) of the prophets in his Kitāb Bad’ al-Khalq wa-Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā’ (Book of the Beginning and of the Prophets). “The term qīṣāṣ has gone through many changes in usage. It is derived from the Qur’ānic qaṣṣa “to tell a (religious) story”, in later times qaṣṣa came to mean simply ‘tale’ or ‘story’, eventually ‘a novel’. The telling of religious stories was done for several centuries by itinerant preachers and ‘story tellers’, qaṣṣāṣ which in this case means tellers of stories of a religious nature, who aroused the piety of the masses and taught morality to them” (Brinner 2002, xii). That these stories were misused by unscrupulous storytellers who made vulgar versions of them led to condemnation of the genre by religious leaders. That explains why these qīṣāṣ are rarely found in later Muslim literature until today.

Similar to the work of Al-Yaqūbī, also ‘Umāra Ibn Wathima’s work did not survive completely: only the conclusion of the story of Moses till the story of Jesus is preserved.³ The story of Moses describes particularly his encounter with the mysterious al-Khiḍr,⁴ which is followed by pages on Joshua, Ezekiel, Elijah, the enigmatic figure Dhū-al-Kifl,⁵ Samson, Saul,

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³ Critical edition of the manuscript from the Vatican library by Khoury 1978.
⁵ This prophet is mentioned in the Qur’ān 21:85–86 along the other prophets. Further information on him is that he was patient and that he was among the saints. His identification is problematic. The Qur’ānic exegesis explains him in various ways, sometimes not even a prophet. Geiger 1898, 155 and Walker 1931, 65 identify him with Job; Torrey 1967, 72, with Joshua.