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A Man Fighting a Lion

A Christian 'Theme' in Yiddish Epics

Abstract

During the medieval and early modern periods, lions served as a common motif in Ashkenazic Jewish culture, bearing diverse symbolism. Also in literature written in Yiddish, the vernacular language of Ashkenazic Jews, lions were often mentioned. In this article, three songs about a man fighting a lion – Samson, David, and Benaiah – found within early modern Yiddish epics, are presented. An analysis of these songs' similar content and form suggests that they are short epic songs which have been initially orally transmitted, and later incorporated into the written long epics in Yiddish which have come down to us. In two of the songs the hero holds the lion's mouth with both hands, shortly before subduing him, an image common in Jewish art but lacking any basis in Jewish texts. This study identifies a Christian background to this image, namely that Samson's battle with the lion foreshadows the Harrowing of Hell and Jesus' releasing mankind's souls from eternal damnation. The study points to the close cultural ties between Jews and Christians in the medieval and early modern eras, which were possible in the sphere of vernacular Yiddish literature. This closeness brought about influences which do not seem to exist in Hebrew literature.

1 Introduction

The lion has been an important motif in many cultures since Antiquity, symbolizing great strength – at times protective and at times destructive. This cultural significance stems most likely from actual encounters with lions, in which this animal's immense physical power and elegant movements (of both males and females), and splendid mane (of males only), were acknowledged. Indeed, the lion was often referred to as 'king of the animals' (*e.g.* BT *Hagiga* 13b).

Lions can easily win a battle with a human being – especially if that human being does not shoot from a gun or drive a motor vehicle. Therefore, a story about a man who wins a fight with a lion, at times only with his bare hands, could have evoked excitement among

its audience, as it related great human strength and courage. Such stories appear already in ancient cultures, like Hercules and the Nemean lion in Greek mythology, or in Assyria the lion hunt of King Ashurbanipal. In ancient Rome *bestiarii* went into public battles with lions, either voluntarily seeking pay or glory, or involuntarily having been sentenced to death (*damnatio ad bestias*). St. Ignatius of Antioch, for example, is attributed such a death (Brent).

On the other hand, some stories tell of people who encountered lions but were surprisingly unharmed by them, like Daniel who was thrown into the lions' den (Daniel 68.25), or St. Gerasimos of the Jordan who tamed a lion in the wilderness by healing his paw.

During the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, the time frame of this article, lions served as a common motif in Ashkenazic Jewish culture, bearing diverse symbolism. For example, the image of lions was often depicted on Torah Ark curtains, and the given names *Arye* and *Leyb* (meanineg 'lion' in Hebrew and Yiddish respectively) were common among men (Beider 277–78 and 358–62). Also in literature written in Yiddish (Shmeruk *et al*. 338–44), the vernacular language of Ashkenazic Jews, lions were often mentioned. So, for example, in one of the oldest extant literary Yiddish documents, we find a fable on a sick lion (Timm, "Fabel vom alten Löwen" 109–70). Likewise, in the sixteenth-century novel entitled after its main protagonist, *Buovo d'Antona*, it is related how two lions entered a hut in which Buovo's wife – a princess – and their two children were present, but did not harm them at all:

> Then two lions [...] saw the hut; they quickly ran inside. Drusiana began to scream. They sniffed her and the children and began to wag their tails, for a lion will do nothing to a person of noble blood. ("Bovo of Antona", stanzas 472–73: *Early Yiddish Epic* 295)[1]

This presence in Ashkenazic culture is not self-evident, since there were no wild lions in medieval and early modern Europe, and captive lions were uncommon.[2] It should therefore be primarily attributed to the ancient strata of Judaism (starting with the Hebrew Bible, see below) in which actual encounters with lions were possible. In addition, the general European fascination by this animal (*e.g.* numerous heraldic signs of European royal dynasties depict an image

1. For the readers' benefit, I chose to use the original Italian name form 'Drusiana' over Frakes' transliteration 'Druzeyne.'

2. *E.g.* in the late eighth century Charlemagne's menagerie in Aachen held a lion which had been received as a gift from the Emir of Cairo, see Mullan and Marvin 97.

of a lion: Fox-Davies 172–90) sustained this motif within Ashkenazic Jewish culture as well.

In the following lines three songs about a man fighting a lion, found within early modern Yiddish epics, will be presented. The similarities between them in both form and content will be examined, as well as the influences of relevant texts from Hebrew and German literatures on them. Additionally, possible influences of visual art and Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible will be considered. The great similarities between the Yiddish songs, and the suggested explanation for a detail in two of the songs which is unaccounted for in Jewish sources, lay the basis for a theory on the songs' possible common origin within the literary tradition of Yiddish epic.

Epic Poetry on Biblical Narratives in Old Yiddish Literature

Retelling single episodes or entire Books of the Hebrew Bible in the Jewish vernacular, the genre of biblical epic held a central role in Yiddish literature for centuries (Turniansky; Frakes). As vernacular retellings of the Bible are an ancient Jewish literary tradition (Levinson 308; Guez-Avigal; Moreen), this genre's expression in Yiddish may have begun as early as the tenth century, when Jews settled in southern Germany and the Yiddish language came into existence. The Yiddish genre was certainly well developed by the fourteenth century, as the earliest extant epic poems in this language indicate. Four short songs written in a manuscript dated 1382 which was found in the Cairo Geniza, have reached us.[3] The short songs retell scenes from Genesis: the expulsion from Paradise, the death of Aaron, Abraham and his father's idols, and Joseph and Potiphar's wife. These poems draw on two cultural sources which seem to characterize most of the genre's works: thematically they are mostly based on classical Jewish sources, namely the biblical text and its midrashic (exegetical) elaboration, while stylistically they demonstrate the influence of literary forms and aesthetic norms used in German epics, especially in the depiction of battle scenes and scenes set in the royal court (Frakes xxii).

Although the extant inventory of Yiddish epics is lacking, it does provide reason to assume that at first single episodes were framed as short songs that could have been transmitted orally, setting the stage for much longer renditions of entire Books, composed in writing later (Shmeruk, *Aspects* 118).

3. This manuscript is found today in the Cambridge University Library (T-S.10.K.22): see Fuks, *Das altjiddische Epos*; Frakes xxii–xxiv, 1–14; Shmeruk, *Aspects* 26–29.

The pinnacle of the genre is considered the epic rendition of the Books of Samuel (known as *Shmuel-bukh*) which have been preserved in manuscripts as well as several printed editions.[4] Other Yiddish epics state that they should be sung according to the *Shmuel-bukh*'s melody (Roman 146, n. 3).

Although print boosted the circulation of Yiddish epics, the seventeenth century brought a decline in the creative achievements of this genre, symbolically indicated by the last known edition of the *Shmuel-bukh* in 1612. The last known printing of any Yiddish biblical epic, however, took place in 1730.[5] The genre consecutively fell into oblivion until the late nineteenth century, when manuscripts and print editions of Yiddish biblical epics have been rediscovered in libraries and archives by researchers of Yiddish literature.

Following their rediscovery, excerpts of these works were printed anew and have started to circulate again among a varied readership of Yiddish and German speakers (Grünbaum; Basin; Staerk and Leitzmann). However, as these poems reached their modern readership through written documentation only, and not as a living tradition, their performative aspects have been lost.

For many years researchers of Yiddish literature accepted the texts' markers of orality, especially the strong presence of a lively 'intrusive' narrator in most of them, at face value. Subsequently, the *Spielmann Theory* which assumed the existence of a class of wandering Jewish *trouvères* who sustained themselves through public performances of the epics, has ruled supreme within the study of Yiddish literature for most of the twentieth century (Shulman viii–ix; Landau xliii–xliv; Erik 67–129). Later opponents of this theory highlighted the lack of historical evidence to support the existence of such a *Spielmann*-class, and argued instead that the Yiddish epics' authors came from rabbinic circles. The opponents of this theory also utterly rejected the significance of orality markers within the texts, dismissing them simply as 'a literary norm' (Shmeruk, "Can the Cambridge Manuscript"). Nevertheless, even the most bitter of opponents to the *Spielmann* Theory agreed with the assumption that the tradition of biblical Yiddish epics began in the Middle Ages in the form of short songs which were orally transmitted and sung to a set melody (Shmeruk, *Aspects* 118). It is important to stress this matter, since unlike written transmission within Jewish society which most often sets the text in the realm of Hebrew-literate rabbinic circles, an oral transmission in the vernacular provides the possibility for additional Jewish voices to be heard. Oral literature, especially in

the Early Modern Era, may draw on narrative traditions preceding print and present variation in narratives which today are considered as canonical texts. This thesis will be demonstrated in the case-study below, highlighting elements of popular entertainment as well as cultural transfer from the co-territorial German Christian society within the Yiddish texts studied.

The Oral-Formulaic Theory

In their early twentieth-century study of epic poetry in the Balkans, Milman Parry and Albert Lord came up with profound insights regarding the transmission of oral literature (Lord). Thanks to their Oral-Formulaic Theory, characteristics of oral composition and transmission could be discovered in epic works originating in premodern times, which have reached us only in writing. Later researchers have expanded this theoretical analysis, often criticizing its dichotomous division between orality and literacy, and suggesting also intermediate modes of composition and transmission between the written and the spoken (Green 12 and 169–202). However, for the purpose of this paper, Lord's definition of purely oral epic poetry is used:

> The singer of tales, equipped with a store of formulas and themes and a technique of composition, takes his place before an audience and tells his story. (Lord 99)

6. See also Parry 80.

According to Lord, an epic *formula* is "A group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea," and "provide[s] a means for telling a story in song and verse" (Lord 4).[6] The epic *themes*, however, have to do with the story itself. These are "groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale," such as the assembly of people, writing a letter, description of the hero's clothes and horse, or the killing of a monster (Lord 68 and 198–99). Although the *theme* usually makes up part of the whole story, it may also circulate as a short independent work (Lord 94).

2 Three Yiddish Songs

As mentioned above, confrontations between a man and a lion are common in the Hebrew Bible, although usually described very

briefly, *e.g.* Samson (Judg. 14.5–6), David (1 Sam. 17.34–36), Benaiah (2 Sam. 23.20), the man of God (1 Kings 13.24–28), the prophet's neighbor (1 Kings 20.36), Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezck. 19.1–9), Daniel (Dan. 6.8–25), etc. Almost all of these stories are found within Yiddish biblical epics as well.[7] While some Yiddish retellings remain close to the original brief biblical text (at times combined with Rashi's commentary), others elaborate it significantly. The former concise retellings are of no interest to this research, since their textual sources are evident and they clearly fulfill their aim to present a vernacular and aesthetic version of the Hebrew Bible to Yiddish-speakers. The elaborate retellings, on the other hand, will be discussed, as they do something more. Their authors take the canonical text as a starting point, and use their own artistic creativity, which is influenced by Jewish Midrashic sources as well as German literary traditions, in order to create a new and exciting version of the ancient story. With Albert Lord's observation in mind, three such Yiddish retellings constitute in my mind a recurring epic *theme*. As stated above, elaborations of battle scenes far beyond the biblical and midrashic texts and bearing influence of the German epics, are common to the Yiddish genre (Turniansky 30) and the *theme* describing a battle with a lion belongs to this category.

Before the three songs can be analyzed, they will be presented here in English translation, preceded by the biblical text, for the benefit of the readers.

Samson

In the Book of Judges it is said that Samson confronted a roaring lion and killed him with his bare hands:

> Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath, and came to the vineyards of Timnath: and, behold, a young lion roared against him. And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand: but he told not his father or his mother what he had done.[8] (Judg. 14.5–6)

The Yiddish epic entitled *Sefer Shoftim*, preserved in a *unicum* manuscript copied in 1511,[9] retells nearly the entire Book of Judges in 524 four-lined stanzas. The epic remains throughout close to the biblical

text along with Rashi's commentary. However, when depicting Samson's fight with the lion, it untypically elaborates the original text. The succinct two biblical verses become eighteen lines in Yiddish, portraying at relative length a fierce fight along with details that are not found in any known Hebrew source:

> Samson and his father and mother journeyed and went down
> [to Timnat
> And they came to the vineyard
> They encountered there a young lion who growled ever so
> [ferociously
> As he saw them approach from far away.
>
> Samson set off, he chased the lion
> He rushed, he was so eager to fight the lion
> Then the two had a ferocious fight
> The roaring of the lion could be heard from afar.
>
> Samson the strong hero, a warrior ever so fine
> He jumped right on the wild lion's back
> The lion was compelled to crouch down to the ground
> He grabbed him at once by the mouth with both hands.
>
> The spirit of God resounded and he trembled
> He split the lion in two from the front to the back
> With neither a knife nor a sword in his hands
> He rent him as if he were a goat's kid.
>
> He split the lion up in the midst of the place
> He returned to his father and mother and told them nothing of it
> (Anonymous, *Sefer Shoftim*: Ms. Parm. 1523, stanzas 316–20)[10]

It should be mentioned here that in two other early modern epic renditions on the Book of Judges, the text remains close to the Hebrew original. The first case is in another – different – Yiddish epic also entitled *Sefer Shoftim*,[11] and the other case is in the epic rendition of the Pentateuch as well as parts of Joshua and Judges, entitled *Sefer Kehillat Yaakov*.[12]

Another relevant matter to be pointed out in this context is that the elaboration of Samson's story in the 1511 epic reflects the new inter-

10. The original Yiddish text reads as follows:

שִׁמְשׁוֹן אוּנ' וואטר אוּנ' מוטר גין תִּימְנַת
זיא דאר צוגין אוּנ' זי גינג' / אוּנ' זיא קומן
אן דען וויין גרטין איין יוּנגין ליבא זיא דו
ווינגין / דער ווארד שרֵיַיאן זוא מורטליכ̇
ן זיר / דו ער זיא זאך הער קומן אין דער
וויַיט אלזו ווער:
שִׁמְשׁוֹן דער מאלֵט זיך אוּיף ער יִיאגט דעם
ליבן נאך / ער אובֿער איילֵט אין צו שט־
רֵייטן וואש אים גר גוך / דו הטן זיא מיט
אנדר איין מורטליכן שטרֵייט / דש גריינין
בון דעם ליבן הורטן מן אלזו ווייט:
שמשׁון דער העלד שטארק דעגין אלזו פֵיין
/ ער שפרנג דען ליבן ווילד וואל אוּיף דען
רוקן זיין / דער ליבא דער מושט זיך ביגאן
וואל נידר צו דער ערדא / ער בוּיר אים מיט
בֵיידן העגדן אין זיין מוּיִיל אוּן אלש גפֿערד:
גמוּיט גוט' עש דער שאלט אוּנ' אוּיִיף אים
עש דער גרוֹיִיזיט / ער שפילט דען ליבן בון
וואָרן ביש הינטן אוּיִיף / אוּן מעשׁר אוּנ' אוּן
שווערט נישׁט אין זיינר הנט / עש ווער עש
איין ציקלֵיין גוועוזן אזו ער אין אנטרנט:
דען ליבן ער צו שפילט מיטן אין דען פֿלון
/ ער קאם צו וואטר אוּנ' צו מוטר אוּנ' זִיִיט
אין נישט דער בון.

11. Yaakov zu der Kannen, *Sefer Shoftim*. This epic (different from the 1511 manuscript which bears the same title) retells the Book of Judges in 396 eight-lined stanzas, the *unicum* of this book is kept in Jerusalem, the National Library of Israel (Signature: R8=94A2391). This text too has been edited in Roman, "The Old Yiddish Epics."

12. Yaakov bar Yizhak, *Sefer Kehillat Ya'akov*. See Staerk and Leitzmann 261–70.

est that his character arose in Jewish Ashkenazic culture. While the Bible presents Samson as a hero with immense physical strength and mentions him along with the other Judges who led Israel,[13] in post-biblical rabbinic literature there are also views which frown upon his actions (Cohen). For example, the saying in the Mishna "Samson went after [the desire of] his eyes, therefore the Philistines put out his eyes" (Mishna *Sota* 1.8), refers in disapproval to Samson's relationships with the Philistine women (cf. Judg. 14.1, 16.1). In this Mishnaic example and in others, Samson is mentioned either without any epithet,[14] or with the lukewarm *ben Manoah*, 'the son of Manoah.'[15] However since the Middle Ages the term *Samson the Mighty* (שמשון הגבור) starts appearing in Ashkenazic sources, reflecting an improvement in his status.[16] The reason for the improvement in Samson's status exceeds the scope of this article, but it may have to do with his good status in the co-territorial Christian culture (see below), where at times he was even referred to as *Sampson fortissimus* (Büchi 163; Wilson and Wilson 200). On the other hand, Samson's rehabilitation could have also been brought about through the contextualization of his story into medieval Jewish existence, as a Jew who dared fight the non-Jewish powerful neighbors.[17]

Shmuel-bukh: David and Benaiah

There are two elaborate stories of a man fighting a lion in the *Shmuel-bukh*. Their original description in the Hebrew Bible, however, is quite short. The first case is David who while trying to convince King Saul to allow him to fight Goliath, boasts that he had killed a lion and a bear. The Bible states:

> And David said unto Saul, Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock: and I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear. (1 Sam. 17.34–36)

There is evidence suggesting that this narrative has often been elaborated upon. For example, in the commentary of Rashi, we read about four additional animals:

> 'Both the lion and the bear' (1 Sam. 17.36): These three words

13. This may have been based on earlier narrative traditions, see Zakovitch.

14. *E.g.* Mishna *Nazir* 9.5; BT *Bava Batra* 91a.

15. *E.g.* Mishna *Nazir* 1.2; Mechilta derabi Yishmael, Beshalakh.

16. *E.g. Hadar Zekenim* commentary on the Torah (Gen. 49.18); *The Book of Pious* (Margaliot ed.) no. 167. Also the Mantua 1564 Yiddish epic on Judges announces in the beginning of the Samson story: "A son was born to Manoah, Samson the Mighty was his name" (Yaakov zu der Kannen, *Sefer Shoftim*, stanza 215.3).

17. Both as a strong Jewish man who fought and defeated his people's enemies, and even as a martyr: Einbinder 134; Offenberg.

(גם את גם) are of inclusive nature, meaning a lion and its two whelps, and a bear and its two cubs.[18]

The second story is also mentioned briefly in the Bible:

> And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, the son of a valiant man, of Kabzeel, who had done many acts, he slew two lionlike men of Moab: he went down also and slew a lion in the midst of a pit in time of snow (2 Sam. 23.20).

Both of these biblical narratives are retold and expanded in the *Shmuel-bukh*, the epic considered, as said above, to be the jewel of the crown of Yiddish biblical epic.

It appears at first sight that the story about David has been translated accurately and in fact briefly in the *Shmuel-bukh*, when David tells King Saul:

> I have slain bears and lions without a sword.
> ("Shmuel-bukh," stanza 352: *Early Yiddish Epic* 43)

Yet the *Shmuel-bukh*'s author had composed in addition to this also an entire passage, indeed an epic *theme*, describing David's battle with the lion (as well as with a bear). This theme has been set within the Yiddish narrative just before the introduction of Goliath (cf. 1 Sam. 17.4), a setting which lacks any parallel in the Hebrew biblical text whatsoever.

It is possible that these lines have also existed as an independent short epic song, as we find in their beginning the opening formula "We want to sing the marvels of a little man" ("Shmuel-bukh," stanza 304: *Early Yiddish Epic* 40). In order to keep the paper focused, only the lines which describe David's fight with the lion are given here, omitting the preceding, similar description of his fight with the bear:[19]

> [...] Then a huge lion came and carried off one of his sheep, which deeply dismayed that most worthy youth: "Can I have no peace from these evil beasts?" He took a huge pole that was thick and long. He swung it at the lion with great force. He gave it such a vehement blow on the back that the huge lion lay stretched out on the ground before him. He thought

that he had quite slain the lion, but up the lion sprang and charged at the lad.

The lion was enraged and roared in its wrath. They fought with each other, those two exceptional ones. The lion struck boldly at the youth, so that his red blood ran down over his ears.

"I think that you want to rage," said the small hero. He chose a very large stone for himself; he threw it with such force at the huge lion, that its red blood flowed down over its ears.

The lion was quite enraged and sprang on the man. It again charged him on its hind legs. Then little David said with a raging spirit: "If you want to wrestle with me, that seems alright with me."

He attacked the lion, grabbed its mane, and threw it to the ground, which enraged the lion. It sprang back up and bit the youth hard. It gnashed its mighty teeth together.

That greatly annoyed the youth; the lion was so strong that it was not going well for the lad. The lad brought the lion to great sorrow: he grasped it by the mouth[20] with both hands.

The lad had won; the lion was injured. He steeled himself to the lion and quickly slew it. "You most powerful devil; you brought me into great distress. I have now well rewarded you for your misdeeds."
("Shmuel-bukh," stanzas 312–20: *Early Yiddish Epic* 41)

Finally, let us consider the retelling of the single verse recounting Benaiah's battle with a lion. In this Yiddish version, Benaiah is presented as a European knight with a horse and a sword:

It began to snow heavily; that angered the lad. He wished to ride away from there; he put on his spurs. Then the young warrior heard such great clamor that it troubled the youth deeply.

"Truly," said Benaiah, "before I ride away from here, I will indeed have to find out what devilish thing cries out thus." He turned toward a pit in order to follow the clamor. There he found a mighty Egyptian underway [...]

He hurried toward the pit from which the clamor came. There he found a mighty lion that roared from hunger. The Moabite counts had put it in there for the sake of entertainment.[21] "Truly," said Benaiah, "Sir Lion, I must have you."

20. Frakes translated here: 'throat.' The original Yiddish anatomical term שלונד can refer to various parts of the beginning of the digestive tract (cf. German *Schlund*, *e.g.* in Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch*). In this specific context, as supported by literary parallels and visual depictions, *mouth* seems the more correct translation (read below).

21. I could not find any Jewish source for this detail, which brings to mind the above-mentioned Roman practice of *bestiarium*.

He hurried to fetch his sword and put it on while up above, and he leapt into the pit, that marvelously bold man. He thought that he could carry off the lion. The lion then roared with rage and attacked the man.

The lion roared with rage in that heavy snow. Clawing and biting, it caused the youth great pain. The youth nonetheless defended himself in his deadly peril, until he had also slain the mighty lion.

The lad then rode from there until he came to David.

("Shmuel-bukh," stanzas 1001–02, 1006–08: *Early Yiddish Epic* 90)

Discussion

Apart from their thematic content, there are also some poetic and formal traits common to all three songs. So, for example, they all describe in detail the actual fighting, which like other elaborate battle scenes in the Yiddish genre, do not draw on the Bible or any Jewish exegetical text.[22] All three songs portray the hero's emotions, namely his eagerness and excitement to fight the lion, while the lion on the other hand is also portrayed as angry and aggressive. Likewise, all three songs narrate the actual battle in a dramatic tone culminating in the hero's triumph over the lion, indicating that these songs' purpose is to entertain their listening human audience.

Moreover, from a formal point of view, all three songs expand a brief biblical description to a longer report, in a manner which is not typical for the rest of the epic work in which they are incorporated. The different manner of retelling the text distinguishes the three songs from the rest of the *Shmuel-bukh* or the Judges-epic, respectively. All this gives rise to the assumption that the three Yiddish songs are in fact renditions of the same epic *theme* describing a man fighting a lion.

Looking closely, the two songs from *Shmuel-bukh* bear similarities which distinguish them from the song found in the Judges-epic: 1) they both describe the blows that the hero suffers from the lion; 2) they both include direct speech, namely the hero's reference to the lion as 'devilish', and his inciting words to the lion; 3) while in the Judges-epic Samson killed the lion with his bare hands (cf. Judg. 14.6), both songs in the *Shmuel-bukh* indicate an instrument used to kill the lion, which is not mentioned in the biblical text (while David's throwing of a stone may be attributed to his subse-

22. *E.g.* see 2 Sam. 21.15–22 elaborated in *Shmuel-bukh* stanzas 1091–130: *Early Yiddish Epic* 96–99; Turniansky 30.

quent battle with Goliath (cf. 1 Sam. 17.35–36, 49–50), his use of a pole (a shepherd's crook?), and Benaiah's use of a sword, are not based on any Jewish source known to me); 4) finally, although all three songs mention the roaring of the lion, only the song on Samson has a biblical source for this (Judg. 14.20).

The similarities between the songs on David and Benaiah seem to have been added to the text in order to make it more aesthetic and appealing. As such, they may be attributed to the literary style of the *Shmuel-bukh*'s author and suggest that the song on Samson may have been retold by a different poet.

On the other hand, there are similarities that occur only between the songs on Samson and David, which make use of details not found in the classical Jewish sources. Both songs mention that the lion was hit on his back and subsequently fell on the ground; and they both relate how the brave hero held with both hands the lion's mouth, shortly before subduing him. While hitting a lion on his back may seem logical during a battle with him, holding his mouth is in fact illogical, as one risks being bitten this way. These similarities were presumably initiated by a common influence, but I could not find any parallel to these details in Jewish classical sources. In 1 Sam. 17.35 it says that David grabbed the lion's beard when trying to free the goat's kid – but a beard is not a mouth,[23] and at any rate in this context it would imply grabbing at the lion's chin with one hand and hitting him (or pulling the kid) with the other. Also Judg. 14.6 relates that Samson simply tore the lion apart like a goat's kid – and as gruesome as that action may sound, realistically speaking it cannot be done starting at the mouth, for if pulled hard enough the jaw would break away from the skull.

23. Interestingly, the classical Aramaic Targum Yonatan translates זקן ("beard") as לוע ("jaw," "mouth").

3 Narrative Art

A study of narrative imagery within Jewish and Christian art sheds light and may even offer a direct source to Samson's hand gesture. As presented below, this gesture is found in visual images which bear particular significance moving beyond literary style, and in fact echo Christian religious thought. It should be stressed, however, that this current research does not claim to offer an exhaustive description of the extant corpus of Jewish or Christian art, but rather to point out

that the image of Samson forcing the lion's mouth open was common and known and may have influenced the songs' authors.

Samson Fighting a Lion in Jewish Art

Descriptions of Samson fighting the lion and holding his mouth with both hands are common in Jewish art, especially in the medieval and early modern Ashkenazic realm.[24] So, for example we see it in a thirteenth-century illuminated manuscript, where Samson also jumps on the lion's back and forces him to the ground. While the Hebrew inscription says: "this is Samson riding the lion and tearing his mouth", it does not imply that this is how he tore the lion "like a kid," only that he forced his mouth open.

24. I am grateful to Dr. Sara Offenberg of Ben Gurion University in the Negev, for generously sharing her vast knowledge in Jewish art and art history with me. After my initial discoveries, Dr. Offenberg has brought to my attention further pictures that support my thesis, some of which are used in this research.

Fig. 1. Samson Rending the Lion, North French Hebrew Miscellany (*c.* 1278): BL, Ms. Add. 11639, f. 520r © British Library Board.

A similar scene is also found in the *Second Nuremberg Haggada* (Germany *c.* 1450), as part of a small cycle of depictions of Samson stories. On the bottom Samson is seen sitting on the lion (having jumped on him?) and holding his mouth, while bees fly in front of them. The Hebrew inscription above explains with incorrect, pseudo biblical citations: "And Samson rent the lion with his mightiness" (Judg. 14.6) followed by "and, behold, there was a swarm of bees before him" (Judg. 14.8) referring to the honey that Samson later found inside the lion's carcass, as well as his riddle about it to the Philistines (Judg. 14.12–14). To the left of that image stands a woman holding a

red flower, representing Samson's first wife who also gave out the riddle's answer to the Philistines. The caption cites (this time accurately) Samson's words after the Philistines had solved his riddle: "If ye had not plowed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle" (Judg. 14.18).

Fig. 2: Samson Rending the Lion, *Second Nuremberg Haggada* (15th century), f. 39r © Collection David Sofer, London.

It seems reasonable that the authors who composed the above-mentioned Yiddish poems drew details from such visual depictions. Still the cultural significance and source of this image of narrative art also need to be determined, and as the Jewish sources have been ruled out, the answer should be sought in the co-territorial Christian culture.

A Man Fighting a Lion in Christian Art and Theology

Depictions of Samson fighting the lion were popular in Christian art of the Middle Ages. In fact, during the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries this biblical subject was one of the most frequent representations taken from the Old Testament (Swarzenski 68 and 71). We find among such depictions the image of Samson holding the lion's mouth with both hands, too, for example in a twelfth-century mosaic:

Fig. 3. Samson Rending the Lion, Cologne, St. Gereon's Basilica (*c.* 12th century)
© Prof. Dr. Klaus Koenen, Universität zu Köln.

25. The *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* was a popular illustrated work of popular theology in the late Middle Ages concentrating on typology, *i.e.* the view that the events of the Old Testament prefigured the events of the New Testament. See Wilson and Lancaster Wilson.

And also in a fourteenth-century *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* illuminated manuscript:[25]

Fig. 4. Samson Rending the Lion, *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, Hs. 2505 (*c.* 1360), f. 55r © Darmstadt, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek.

26. See for example the depiction of David killing the Lion in the Winchester Bible (Winchester Cathedral Library, 1160-75), f. 218r.

27. It should be noted, however, that in early Christian thought some views considered Samson as a type of the Sinner and the lion as a symbol of Christ (Swarzenski 72).

28. In the medieval bestiaries Jesus was likened to a lion, because it was believed, for example, that lion's cubs were born dead and three days after their birth they were brought to life by their father. See: White 7–11; Clark 40, 42 and 60.

29. The Harrowing of Hell refers to Jesus' victory over the Devil and death between the time of his Crucifixion and his Resurrection. In his triumphant descent to Hell, Jesus brought salvation to the righteous people who had died since the beginning of the world until the Harrowing, as their souls could not have been saved prior to his atoning death. See Warren; Romilly Allen 278–81.

30. In German it is called *Höllen-schlund*, 'schlund' being the word used by the *Shmuel-bukh* to describe the lion's mouth.

31. The *Biblia pauperum* ("Paupers' Bible") was a medieval tradition of picture Bibles visualizing the typological correspondences between the Old and New Testaments. These Bibles placed the illustration in the centre, with only a brief text or sometimes no text at all. See Horst 14–17 (especially 16 n. 26).

At times, interestingly, the gesture of holding the lion's mouth with both hands is also used in Christian art for depicting David's battle.[26]

The significance of this gesture is clear in Christian religious writing. Indeed, unlike some Jewish sources, in Christian thought Samson is regarded positively.[27] Already the New Testament mentions him among other pious men such as David and Samuel:

> And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions. Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. (Letter to the Hebrews 11.32–34)

Within these lines, the lion bears a negative significance in Christian thought (though not always).[28] Thus, the New Testament likens the Devil to a lion:

> Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. (1 Peter 5.8)

In this sense, according to the typological view of the Old Testament, Samson's battle with the lion foreshadows the Harrowing of Hell,[29] with the lion symbolizing the Devil. Moreover, Samson's forcing open the lion's resisting jaws actually symbolizes one of the most fundamental ideas of Christian thought – Jesus forcing open the Gates of Hell, thereby releasing mankind's souls from eternal damnation. The Gates of Hell are also known as "Hellmouth," a metaphoric image often envisaged as the gaping mouth of a monster (Romilly Allen 280).[30]

A clear and decisive visual depiction of this typological view is found in a fifteenth-century Netherlandish *Biblia Pauperum*.[31] The central image is of Jesus saving souls from the Hellmouth. To the left is an image of David defeating evil by killing Goliath, and to the right is an image of Samson defeating the lion. The text at the top right explains: "Samson signifies Christ who when he freed man from the power of the devil killed the lion."

Fig. 5. Descent into limbo, flanked by David slaying Goliath left, and Samson killing the lion right, Netherlandish *Biblia Pauperum*, *c*. 1465 © Trustees of the British Museum 1845, 0809.29, sheet 28.

Most interestingly, in the same manuscript of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* referred to earlier, the story of Benaiah and the lion (top) is also painted as foreshadowing Christ's victory over the Devil (bottom). In the picture, Benaiah stabs the lion with a weapon, steps with his foot on the lion's body (back?), causing subsequently the lion's death and the opening of its mouth:

Fig. 7. Christ's victory over the Devil (top), Benaiah killing the lion (bottom), *Speculum Humanae Salvationis,* Hs. 2505 (*c.* 1360), f. 54v © Darmstadt, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek.

4 Conclusions

The three Yiddish songs about a man's battle with a lion discussed in this article are a good case study for three cultural phenomena: the oral transmission of epic narratives within Yiddish speaking society, the strong relationship between text and picture, and the influence Christian culture had on Ashkenazic Jews, especially through their vernacular culture.

The similarities between the three songs which are not based on biblical or other Jewish exegetical texts serve as an indication that they

are a classical epic *theme*, as described in the Oral-Formulaic Theory. While lengthy Old Yiddish epics such as *Sefer Shoftim* appear to have been composed in writing, the genre's beginning was in short songs which were transmitted orally. Within the lengthy written epics an oral texture is still present, like the stanzaic structure and the use of epic formulae and epic *themes*. These may be remnants of a lost oral epic tradition. Likewise the transmission of details from one context to another similar one (like the lion's roar in Samson's song transmitted to David's and Benaiah's songs) is a phenomenon common to oral literature.

The gesture of opening the lion's mouth with both hands is clearly of Christian origin. This Christian depiction was adopted into Jewish vernacular-literary and visual traditions, by Jewish authors and artists who undoubtedly knew that its origin was in Christian culture where they had first seen or heard it. Although they probably did not accept its religious meaning and merely considered the gesture as an act of strength. We thus learn of the close cultural ties between Jewish and Christian epic poets in the German lands during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Era, and inevitably also between their audiences. Just like the poet, it may be that also the Jewish audience had heard such a description ('theme') in a Christian recital, and liked it. This contact between Jews and Christians may also have been the reason for the rehabilitation of Samson in Jewish Ashkenazic culture, echoing Samson's good status in Christian culture (this does not undermine other aspects of this process, namely identifying the Christian neighbors with the Philistines whom Samson defeated several times).

Finally, another possible path along which the Christian story penetrated Jewish culture is the visual image. It may very well be that a Christian picture or a statue of Samson fighting the lion and opening his mouth inspired Jewish poets to retell Samson's story – either while being aware of the original religious meaning of the story, or fully unaware of it.

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