

# SAMSON AGONISTES<sup>1</sup>

RAYMOND APPLE

Samson is one of the last of Israel's judges. Because of his immense strength he is the Hebrew Hercules, a hero whose exploits related in Judges 13-16 and embroidered in the Midrash have been told, re-told and embellished in many other forms of culture, not only because the narrative is exciting but because of its place in ancient international history and the inner thinking and dilemmas of the protagonists.

There is a version of the Samson story in Milton's dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes*, published in 1671 together with his *Paradise Regained*. While based on and led by the somewhat unembroidered biblical text, the poem is important for two reasons. It provides more depth to Samson's psychology and personality, and it applies the Biblical story to the Puritan and Restoration struggles in which Milton was involved. However, the poem is not limited to the Biblical narrative. It moves the story on, introduces new characters and provides a sequel to Samson's capture, blinding and imprisonment. Much of *Samson Agonistes* (the name, from Greek, denotes struggle) takes place in Samson's mind, oscillating between hope and despair, between self-pride and self-judgment. The Bible story and the poem end in the same way, Samson literally bringing the house down – but the poem makes Samson's heart, mind and soul thrash about before this happens, supplying an extra dimension to the narrative.

What qualified Milton to address this theme? It is not only the superficial but not insignificant fact that Milton and Samson both suffered the loss of their eyesight. According to Harold Fisch,<sup>2</sup> Milton had a "Hebraic temper" which enabled him to write "the two most famous English poems on Old Testament subjects, namely *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*". Alan Rudrum goes further and says the poem is a fusion of Hebraic, Christian and Greek elements.<sup>3</sup> Milton had learned Hebrew in his youth and had a knowledge of post-Biblical Judaism, aided by Latin translations. In his con-

*Dr. Raymond Apple is emeritus rabbi of the Great Synagogue, Sydney, and a former president of the Australian and New Zealand orthodox rabbinate.*

troversial 1643 work on divorce he quotes “rabbies” (*sic*) such as Maimonides and Kimḥi.

*Samson Agonistes* is a dramatic continuation of the Samson story and a parable of 17<sup>th</sup> century political events in England that involved Milton. After Charles I’s execution Milton had become Latin Secretary to the Council of State but because of his blindness which was more or less total by 1652, he needed assistance in drafting state papers, in business correspondence and in writing poetry, which he generally had to dictate. In *Samson Agonistes* he laments that “inward light alas puts forth no visual beam” (lines 162-3). With the Restoration he was arrested but released. His wretched physical condition and his ongoing objection to the political structure are evident from *Samson Agonistes*. Fisch says the poem not only shows the Jew as hero “but the possibility of expressing through him the personal aspirations, ideals and values of the author. It is characteristic of the religion of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that England as a whole should be identified with Israel.” Marta Shapiro, writing on Milton’s use of the Biblical Covenant concept, says: “The Covenantal theory had inspired the Puritans of 17th-century England and had influenced them to analogize themselves to Israel.”<sup>4</sup> In Milton’s hands Samson’s experiences are a parable of the times, but to fit the new circumstances, literary license has required the story to be modified. The following are some of the differences between the Bible text and the poem. They flesh out and add to the story, not only in terms of events but their interpretation.

*The Timing:* Milton takes for granted the Biblical details of Samson’s exploits and builds on them, imagining what followed Samson’s capture by the Philistines. The poem opens with Samson an eyeless prisoner, reluctantly granted time off from labor because the Philistines have a feast-day. He sits and muses in an unfrequented place – “ease to the body some, none to the mind/From restless thoughts.../what once I was, and what am now” (lines 14-22). We do not know how much time has passed since his capture and how long it is until his final destruction of the Philistine temple. It cannot be merely a day, though we gain this impression. The regrowth of his hair and the restoration of his strength must take their time.

*Samson’s Father:* Manoa is not the old quiescent Biblical Mano’ah whose very name means “quiet”. Indeed there may be a possibility that the name he bears in the poem is from a different root that means “to move”. He is no

longer a spectator but is ready to stir himself for his son's release, even if the Philistines humiliate him. We are unsure what means he proposes to use – threats, bribes, or concessions? – and at what cost. There is also a chronological question. In Judges, Mano'ah seems to have predeceased Samson, who is interred in his father's burial place (Judges 17:31), whereas in the poem Manoa is very much alive.

*New Characters:* The poem introduces new characters. *The chorus* moves the story on, provides external observers who see Samson's plight and get him to feel ashamed, though he wonders why the Israelites (at least according to the Biblical text) did not show him more sympathy and God was not more appreciative of his efforts. The poem introduces a Philistine strong man, *Harapha* (presumably from the root *h-r-ph*, though we do not know in what sense), who does more than provide comic relief as was customary in the stage dramas of the period. Harapha motivates Samson to drop his torpor and see that there still is something he can do for God and Israel. *The Officer* comes to summon Samson to the Philistine feast; Samson refuses – he will not add obeisance to idols to his sins - and then agrees, because he senses an opportunity for the most decisive deed of all (Judges 16:30), even though he realizes that it will cost him his life.

*Introspection:* The biblical Samson is proud and self-confident, apparently not given to introspection, though the text may have squashed this aspect in the interest of a straight-forward narrative, whilst in the poem he is torn apart and oscillates between pride and humility, moving between blaming God and blaming himself. He discovers that a person's "worst imprisonment" is "the dungeon of thy self" (lines 155-6). His arrival at self-understanding is crucial to his rehabilitation. Eventually there is "calm of mind, all passion spent" (line 758). Now he is ready to *die with the Philistines* (16:30). It can be that the poem tells us more about Milton than about Samson, more of a window into Milton's heart, soul and mind than about Samson's. Milton is more pensive than Samson.

*Blindness:* The Bible does not dwell much on Samson's blindness or describe his abject physical and mental pain; his blindness is much more of an issue in the poem. Milton has a riveting word picture of Samson "eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves" (line 41). The experience is "worse than chains" (line 68). "Light, the prime work of God, is to me extinct" (line 70).

Milton is describing his own blindness, even though with him it is a medical condition (probably untreated glaucoma), whilst Samson's sight has been deliberately destroyed by the enemy. The rabbis say that because Samson followed his eyes to sin (Num. 16:39), it was his eyes upon which his punishment fell (Mishnah *Sotah* 1:8). In biblical thinking the eyes are often symbolic of sexual lust, sin and deception.<sup>5</sup> Allegorically, Milton feels his generation is blind to the dangers of a restored monarchy.

*Hair*: Samson teases Delilah and finally admits that if his hair is cut he will lose his strength. The reason is not completely spelled out, either in the Bible or the poem. There is probably a link with the Nazirite rules which he has transgressed and which include letting his hair grow long. In the poem Samson no longer seems so vain and he can laugh at his hair: "God, when he gave me strength, to show withal how slight the gift was, hung it in my hair" (lines 58-59). He even doubts that his hair was the source of his strength, which he says was "diffus'd ... through all my sinews, joints and bones." In other words, regardless of his hair he was through and through an unusually strong person, though when he lost God's favor he felt bereft, weak and limp. There may be an analogy with David's son Absalom, about whom the rabbinic sages say (Mishnah *Sotah* 1:8), "Absalom gloried in his hair, so he was hanged by his hair".

*Repentance*: In the Bible, Samson is a weak character who is too sensual to resist the wiles of Philistine women. In the poem his relationship with Delilah becomes nasty when she admits she wanted power over him and status in the eyes of her people. His blindness is actually good for her because he would need her protection. He now wants nothing to do with her and as he develops into a penitent he seeks God's forgiveness for succumbing to temptation.

*Foreigners*: The Bible narrative shows how alluring Samson finds non-Israelite women, despite the scriptural warnings against them.<sup>6</sup> In the poem he admits that he was not careful enough but now he knows that one should only do what is acceptable to God.

*The enemy*: Milton's concern is not so much with Israel's war with the Philistines as such, but how they personify an enemy (the Royalists) that must be opposed and uprooted. Fisch says, "The Puritan soldiers sing the songs of David... and apply the contents to their own circumstances. Their enemies

the Cavaliers become automatically the Philistines, which helps to explain the *dramatis personae* in Milton's poem."

*Strength*: Samson is so strong that 3000 men are needed to capture him.<sup>7</sup> In the Bible his strength is physical – *ko'ah*, with hardly any *gevurah*, self-mastery or moral courage.<sup>8</sup> In the poem he develops *gevurah*. He says ironically, "O glorious strength/Put to the labour of a beast, debased/Lower than bond-slave!" (lines 36-38). He sees that the source of his strength is God, not some magical quality that resides in his hair. His final act is magnificently described in the poem: "Samson hath quit himself/ Like Samson" (line 1709), though what these words really mean requires debate.

*Government*: Monarchy is the Biblical norm despite Samuel's criticisms. In the poem Milton shows his republican leanings in lines that criticize the policies introduced or rather imposed by incumbent authority. His fortunes are affected by the Restoration, but he ends the poem confident that the royalist cause will eventually collapse even if he personally is caught up in the tornado.

*Free Speech and Toleration*: Biblical society was not yet ready to enunciate free speech and religious toleration, but Milton had already, in *Areopagitica*, expressed his belief in a "nation arousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks". He said he "preferred Queen Truth to King Charles".

*Religion*: Samson is no unbeliever and might even have a degree of prophetic potential, though what he brings to God's service is not words but physical strength. In the poem he wrestles with himself (and with God) and finally admits that he has transgressed the Divine will by giving in to lust and breaking the Nazirite law, even though at all times he had the best of intentions and really wanted to serve God. Milton too is a believer, whose life begins with conventional Christianity. He does not become an unbeliever but a challenger, asking whether God really wants inflexible orthodoxy and how He can approve modes of government that squash individual difference.

*Violence*: Knowing that Samson finally decided he had to wreak violence to achieve his ends, Milton wonders whether the way to change a government is revolution or evolution, though these are not the terms he uses. Since both the Biblical story and the poem end with Samson destroying the building, Milton indicates that in the last resort, patience is rewarded. We sense that Milton's

own mind has been exercised and drained by the cross-currents of political developments but has not abandoned his faith that events will turn out successfully.

John T. Shawcross argues that Milton “recognized that each man must act separately, not simply await a Great Deliverer, like Samson, in order to rid man of the bondage of Philistines”.<sup>9</sup> Shawcross’ word “separately” is difficult. Each man certainly has a singular individuality and distinct talents, but acting separately may well cause anarchy. If each is a one-man band like Samson he may turn into an egotist and take all the credit for himself. And what happens if he fails? Surely the supporters of a cause need to act in coordination with an agreed person giving the lead.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that Milton’s poem is not a mere recast or update of the Biblical story clothed in the garments of a later generation (though some modern writers seem to take this view) is not only self-evident but important. Milton is not simply a narrator, telling again in his own words an ancient, exciting, well-known and arguably well-loved scriptural story. The poem is not the Bible speaking, but Milton adjusting it. However, T.S. Eliot thinks Milton is a poet without “visual imagination”. It is an unfair allegation when we look at *Samson Agonistes*. The poet imagines and visualizes Samson’s situation in words that are far from plain and pedestrian. So what if the poet has a contemporary political agenda? He has something to say about and to his generation. It suits him to use the Biblical story, but to serve his own purposes some aspects of the story must be recast, it must be given a sequel and the language must become richer and more artistic.

This is probably why Peggy Frost ends her article on the subject with this statement borrowed from Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*: “Poetic influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence... is a history of anxiety and self-serving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism.”<sup>11</sup> Frost does not reveal how far, or if at all, she agrees with Harold Bloom. All she says is, “In characterizing Milton’s use of the Biblical narrative for his own great work, we may cite what Harold Bloom has written...”

Though Bloom speaks of “two strong, authentic poets”, in our case there are not really two poets (“strong, authentic” or otherwise) but there is a prose text (the Book of Judges) and one poet, John Milton. Nonetheless Bloom’s statement still cries out for comment. Does Milton “misread” the Bible and commit “an act of creative correction” which is untrue to the Biblical story? Not really; he shows the way in which an ancient episode can provide an idea, a framework, a vocabulary and a cast of characters for a later writer to re-mould for the purposes of a contemporary polemic. True, there is an element of “anxiety and self-serving caricature, or distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism”. But does Milton claim to be merely paraphrasing the original text? The test would then be whether a person who was seeking the story of Samson would start with Milton and then move further back to the Bible and wonder why the Book of Judges said things differently. Milton is using the original text with his own emphases, which is actually what the Midrash does to a scriptural text...or is Bloom suggesting that the whole midrashic tradition must be rejected? There is a case to be made for the proposition that Milton is actually constructing a Midrash. In Midrash the rabbinic fancy fills in what could possibly be behind, between and beyond the textual lines. The Midrashim do not necessarily agree with each other, nor need they always be taken literally. Rimon Kasher has written about midrashic method, “The Sages... adapt the Bible to their needs... The midrashic commentaries do not always stem from textual and exegetical needs”.<sup>12</sup>

Must we judge a poet’s utilization of an old theme as virtually insulting the original author? Must we be so hostile when a poet re-works his source material for the sake of what Gabriel Sivan calls “moral passion and prophetic rebuke”?<sup>13</sup> This latter approach to the Bible is an age-old and widely accepted activity of writers of later generations. Sivan says bluntly, “With varying insight, but unvarying consistency, writers in almost every land and culture have for more than a millennium found a matchless treasure house of themes and characters in the Bible. These they have reworked and reinterpreted in the portrayal of eternal motifs.”<sup>14</sup>

#### NOTES

1. This is not the first article on this subject in the *Jewish Bible Quarterly* or its predecessor *Dor leDor*. All have valuable insights but the present author felt that the subject needed a fresher and broader approach. The previous articles are Marta Shapiro, “The Hebraic Motives of Judges 13-

- 16 Relevant to John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*," *Dor leDor* 4:2 (1975-6), pp.56-62, 4:3 (1976), pp.113-120, 4:4 (1976), pp.168-175; Peggy Frost, *Dor le Dor* 15:3 (1987), pp.150-159.
2. *The Dual Image: A Study of the Figure of the Jew in English Literature* (London: WJC, 1959), pp.40-41; H. Fisch, "Milton through the Ages", *Jewish Chronicle* (London), 5 May, 1967; A.D. Hallam, "Milton's Knowledge and Use of Hebrew", *Mila waMila* (Melbourne Univ.), no.5, pp.18-22.
3. A. Rudrum, *Milton: Samson Agonistes* (London: Macmillan, 1969), Introduction.
4. *Dor Le Dor* 4:2 (1975-6), p.57.
5. Numbers 15:39.
6. Deuteronomy 7:3.
7. Judges 15:11.
8. J.B. Soloveitchik, "Catharsis in *Halakhic* Perspective", *Tradition*, vol.17, no.2 (1978) pp.38 *et seq.*
9. J.T. Shawcross, "Calm of Mind" in J.A. Wittreich (ed.), *Irony as Tragic Effect: Samson Agonistes and the Tragedy of Hope* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve, 1971), pp.289-306.
10. Numbers 14:4
11. Peggy Frost, *loc.cit.*, quoting Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (NY: OUP, 1973), p.30.
12. R. Kasher, "The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature", in M.J. Mulder (ed.), *Mikra: The Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Maastricht: Van Gorcum/Pa.: Fortress, 1988), p.561.
13. G. Sivan, *The Bible and Civilization* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1973), p.226.
14. *op. cit.*, p.218.



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