# Samson

Samson is one of the great examples of faith in the New Testament, someone the Bible expects us to learn from. So what sort of man was this hero of faith?

The Israelites had again done wrong in the eyes of Yahweh, who had given them into the power of the Philistines. At a political level it is a period of considerable violence in Israel’s national relationships. Arguably international relations are thus in their “normal” state; strife is more that normal state than is peace. On a gloomy day it can seem that to seek peace is always to work against the grain, that nations are inherently violent ‑ they always have been and they always will be. The individuals who make up nations are likewise innately violent (especially the men, for gender questions do seem to come into play here) ‑individual and national violence feed each other. The story of Samson in Judges 14‑17 is part of the story of violent relationships between the Israelites and the Philistines; Samson was to be the man to give the Philistines something to think about. It is also the story of his personal violence.

## Old Testament James Bond, yet tragic hero

Samson was indeed someone God used. He was a man with a calling. Yet he was a tragic hero. But none of that is where the story starts. The first fact that becomes clear in his story is that Samson was the Old Testament James Bond. He fancied a Philistine girl, and went to win her. On the way a lion attacked him and he tore the lion apart the way you kill a goat (which would be more than enough for most of us), with his bare hands. “But he did not tell his father or mother what he had done,” the story says. Well, you wouldn’t, would you? When he got to Timnah, the Philistines swindled him out of 30 lengths of linen and 30 suits (£3000?). So he went on to the next Philistine town, killed 30 men, and paid his debt with their clothes.

It seems he was not really satisfied with this revenge. Eventually he went and caught 300 foxes, tied torches to their tails, and turned the foxes loose in the Philistine cornfields and orchards. The Philistines, in their turn, killed Samson’s wife and her father, though Samson got his own back on them in the end. “He smote them, hip and thigh, with great slaughter.” This time the Philistines invaded Judah, looking for him. Samson’s own people persuaded him to surrender himself, and the Philistines tied him up, but he broke their ropes as if these were sticky tape. He looked around and spotted a dead donkey, grabbed the donkey’s jaw and went flailing at the Philistines, killing another thousand of them. The interwovenness of personal and national violence, and the place of God in all this, is noted in the observation that his parents have to be forgiven their opposition to Samson’s marriage plans because they did not realize that these were giving Yahweh opportunity to intervene in politics and take some action to free Israel from Philistine oppression for a while (Jdg. 14:4).

The way the story has opened has revealed Samson’s other obvious characteristic as well as his violent streak, his eye for girls. Mieke Bal has noted how the interwovenness of sex and violence is characteristic of the Book of Judges as a whole, and it is the combination of sex and violence that invites us to view Samson as an Old Testament James Bond, though it must be noted that in due course even James Bond cleaned up his act somewhat in the light of Aids. Samson is pre‑Aids, more a child of the 1960s. Samson first got into trouble because he fancied a Philistine girl, and later he was nearly caught in Gaza when he was spending a night with a girl there. But then there was Delilah, who was not just pretty or sexy: he fell for Delilah.

That brings us up short. James Bond does not fall in love. This is the point at which we move from Samson the Old Testament James Bond to Samson the tragic hero. Women and violence are the two themes that link Samson and James Bond, but the links are superficial. James Bond is always the successful ladies’ man. If a heart is broken, it will not be his. He rides off into the sunset with a sequence of attractive girls.

For all the similarities, Samson is not quite the same. There are four women in Samson’s story. There is the girl he married, the girl he picked up, and the girl he fell in love with, who occupy Judges 14, 15, and 16. But before we come to them, we read in chapter 13 about a very different woman, the one who bore him. She was like a number of other women in the Old Testament such as Sarah and Hannah. For years she had not been able to have children. They had tried and tried and hoped and prayed, and it had never happened. Then God promised she would have a son, and they called him Samson. It is a suggestive name: it means “Sunshine.” As far as his mother was concerned, the sun shone out of his eyes. You can almost see her glowing pride as he grows to be bigger and stronger than anyone else in the area. That was the first woman in Samson’s life. The picture of her and her husband contrasts sadly with the story of the woman he married because he fancied her and the woman he spent the night with because he felt like it.

Then there was the woman he fell in love with. Here is when Samson becomes a human being, when he softens and becomes vulnerable ‑ though I suspect there would be a feminist/psychoanalytical critique of this so‑called falling in love. If he does grow as a person, it is the means of his downfall. The tragedy was that it was a tale of unrequited love. Delilah was able to be the woman who found out the secret of Samson’s strength and to tell the Philistines, for 30 pieces of silver. “And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with bronze fetters. And he ground at the mill in the prison.” Delilah is a woman like Ya’el but working for the other side, using her womanliness in that connection as Samson is using his manliness, but also using her intelligence as he is not, because men so easily throw sense to the winds when diverted by what they think is love. In Judges Yahweh’s spirit may convey power but it does not necessarily convey insight.

## Man with a calling, man God used

What exactly was it that was tragic about Samson? He was a disappointment to his family, he made a mess of his relationships, his manliness and strength were pathetically overcome and made fun of by the Philistines, but what was tragic about Samson was the contrast between what he was and what he was supposed to be before God. Samson was a man with a calling. He was supposed to be God’s agent in liberating Israel from the Philistines. What happens, however, is that at the beginning of the story he marries a Philistine, and at the end of the story he dies with the Philistines.

There were other aspects to his calling. To mark him out as Yahweh’s servant, he was supposed to be a Nazirite, someone especially devoted to God. A Nazirite was different in three ways from other people. He abstained from alcohol; it was perhaps a symbol of being filled with another Spirit. He avoided eating certain things, keeping a special version of the kosher laws that all Israelites observed. The point was not that there was anything wrong with these foods; they were not a threat to health. Abstaining from them simply marked the Nazirite out. His third distinctive mark was that he kept his hair long. That was another sign of his consecration, and thus another sign of the strength which came from the God he was consecrated to.

Those were Samson’s vows. He breaks each one of them. First we see him at the same kind of wedding feast as everyone else, where (no doubt) the wine flowed freely. Then he eats some honey produced by bees who had made their nest in the carcase of that lion he killed, which means that the honey would be unclean. Finally there was his hair. “How can you say you love me,” said Delilah, “when you keep your secrets from me? What is the secret of your strength?” She nagged him day after day until she wore him down and he told her. “It’s the fact that scissors have never been near my head, not since I was born, because I have been set apart as a Nazirite since birth. If my hair were cut off, my strength would go. I would be as weak as anyone else.” When Delilah saw that he had now told her the truth, she sent word to the Philistine SAS. “Come back one more time. He has told me.” They came with the eleven hundred shekels they had promised her. She lulled him to sleep on her lap. Perhaps he was tired of fighting, like Sisera, and subconsciously wanted out ‑ in which case he reminds one of the tragic violent heroes of films such as *Once Upon A Time In America* who find they can never get out. As he slept like a baby on its mother’s lap, Delilah called a man to cut off his seven plaits of hair, whereupon his strength left him. Then she shouted out, “Samson, the Philistines are on top of you.” He woke up with a yawn and said to himself, “Well, I shall soon see them off again,” not realizing that Yahweh had left him. It was the contrast between the man he was and the man he was supposed to be that constituted his tragedy.

This might have been the end of the story, but it is not, and that is one good reason why the story appears in the Bible. We do not, of course, need the Bible to tell us James Bond stories. We have Ian Fleming to do that. But part of the reason why this kind of story is there is that inside most of us there is a little James Bond (or a little Delilah). That is partly why so many people like those films. They are fantasies.

The Bible’s James Bond, however, lives in the real world, where sex and violence rebound on us. It makes us live in the actual world, not in a celluloid one. Then precisely because many of the instincts of Samson or Delilah are inside us, something of the tragedy of their stories also appears in our lives. We misuse our opportunities, mess up our relationships, and hurt people. We know that we fall short of God’s vision and of the commitments we make to God.

The Samson story challenges us to look in the eye what it is that God wants to do with us and to look in the eye the kind of special commitments God asks of us, and to see how we are getting on with them. It presents us with a man who made a mess of his life, his relationships, and his calling. But it then tells us that this is not quite the end of the story, because even in that situation it is still possible to be the person God uses. This does not undo the tragedy, as the end of the story shows, but it takes a little of the edge off it.

The Philistines had captured Samson, gouged out his eyes, and taken him to Gaza. John Milton wrote a poem about Samson, whose blindness he shared. Many painters have painted Samson in his blindness, too. It is this aspect of Samson that has caught their imagination, perhaps because to them sight is so all‑important; they recall the sculptor in the play *Whose Life Is It Anyway*, who wishes to commit suicide when paralysis makes him unable to continue the creative activity which defines him as a human being. Milton also wrote a poem in which he overtly reflected on his own blindness.

 God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
and post o’er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.

In a terrible sense that will also be true of Samson. Perhaps Yahweh was using Samson’s love for Delilah just as had been the case with his attraction for the Philistine woman with whom the story began.

The Philistines had chained him up and set him to grinding corn in the prison. There the hair that had been cut off began to grow again. Then the time came for a festival in honour of their god, Dagon, and they assembled to worship him for delivering their troubler, Samson, into their hands (a woman never gets the credit, even if she does do the work). They fetched Samson from the prison and stood him in the middle of the temple to perform for their entertainment. Samson had to be led by a boy, of course, because he could not see. He asked the boy to put him where he could feel the pillars in the temple. It is helpful to know something about Philistine architecture: temples had two pillars in the middle to support the roof, as is illustrated in examples that have been excavated in Palestine in recent years. Samson began to press with the strength of each arm on the two pillars; and Samson prayed. Samson is praying! “Yahweh, remember me. Give me strength just once more, Yahweh. Give me one chance to get revenge on the Philistines, at least for blinding me. I will be happy to die with them!” He pushed with all his might, and the temple collapsed on the Philistine rulers and people and on Samson himself. He killed many more when he died than while he lived. The story ends with his family going to get his body, and burying him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father.

It is the end of the story, but Samson is mentioned that once more in scripture, in Hebrews 11. “What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson….” Even Samson is in the list of the heroes of faith; even Samson is among the cloud of witnesses. If there is room for Samson, there is room for you and me.