

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

Neither the range of the eye nor the curvature of the earth's surface will allow Christ to see the cities and empires of the world from any mountain.

The Devil of deviations and the Satanism of time leave Him, and angels of the Divine Plan, and the Holy Programme, and the Eternal Melodies come and minister unto Him, hymn themselves in Him.

W. W. PEYTON.

### SAMSON.<sup>1</sup>

THE story of Samson confronts us with a most difficult theme. How comes this reckless, sinning man to be reckoned among the heroes of God? In assigning him such a place, I confess that sacred history raises difficulties which I am unable completely to solve. On the one hand, I see clearly that, in estimating the career of a man like Samson, we are apt to be influenced by unreasonable scruples. We have no right to judge him by the standards of the Christian conscience, or to settle beforehand what use God may make of a man like him in His government of the world. But, on the other hand, there is much in Samson's history which we find hard to reconcile with the character of a great and good man, and with the presence and controlling power of the Spirit of God in his life.

I shall run over the outstanding events in Samson's career, so that we may be in a position to estimate its ethical and spiritual significance, and to see if there is not good reason for endorsing the verdict of Scripture, and assigning him a place among the heroes of the Old Testament. A godly mother receives a Divine warning that a child is to be born who is destined in God's purpose to play a great part in the history of His chosen people. She

<sup>1</sup> A lecture.

is enjoined to bring up the child as one set apart for God's service. In token of this, he is to keep his hair uncut, and is to be bound by the vow of abstinence from wine and strong drink and from forbidden foods, especially meats employed in the worship of heathen gods. The child is born, grows up to maturity, and, we are told, the Spirit of God begins to stir his soul within him.

Then comes the story of his love for a Philistine maiden, and his determination to wed her, in spite of the remonstrance of his parents. On the way to visit his promised bride he encounters and slays a lion. The episode suggests a riddle, which he propounded to the Philistine youths. Samson loses his bet through their treachery. This incident stirs into activity his hidden hostility to the Philistines, and he determines on revenge. We note in the revenge which he exacted on this occasion the grim humour that characterizes all his dealings with the Philistines. He accomplishes his bloody reprisals in a spirit of sardonic gaiety, and comports himself very much as a practical joker. He subsequently abandoned his bride in disgust, and her parents gave her to another man. This is the story of Samson's first exploit against the Philistines.

Then comes the second. The Philistines resolved to capture their formidable foe, and enlist the services of the craven-hearted Judæans over whom they had so long tyrannised. These men of Judah went to the stronghold where Samson was, to bind him and deliver him into the hand of the Philistines. "Bind me," said Samson, "and hand me over to my enemies; all I ask is that you will not traitorously put me to death yourselves." The thing is done, and he is brought away. The Philistines give a shout of triumph when they see him. But the Spirit of the Lord comes mightily upon him, and he snaps, as if they were burnt flax, the new ropes with which he had been bound. Then, seizing the jawbone of an ass that lay

to hand, he falls upon the Philistines, who were filled with superstitious dread at such a portent of strength, and with his frail weapon destroys a thousand men. Mark again the jovial spirit, the rollicking humour, with which he celebrates his exploit. "With the jawbone of an ass I have killed a mass of men; with the jawbone of an ass I have smitten a thousand men." This is the story of his second exploit.

And then comes the third. Samson becomes entangled in an intrigue with a loose woman at Gaza. His enemies quietly dispose themselves, expecting to seize him as he makes his way out of the town in the morning. But Samson rises in the middle of the night, and, in that jesting humour of his, takes hold of the brazen gates of the city, lifts them clean out, with the posts in which they are placed, carries them to the top of a neighbouring hill, and leaves them there. This, of course, adds to their resentment against him, and helps to bring about the crisis in which he perished.

The story of Samson's last exploit against the Philistines is as follows. Again he forms a degrading attachment to a courtesan, an attachment which takes possession of his whole nature. The woman was a heartless traitress, and proved a ready instrument of the Philistines, who, by bribes and threats, induced her to win from Samson the secret of his supernatural strength. She exerts all her wiles for this end. At first Samson resists, but at length he is undone, and reveals the Divine secret. Samson is betrayed and taken prisoner. He is carried away, helpless, to gaol. His eyes are put out, manacles are fastened on him; he is chained to the handle of a great millstone, and compelled to do the work of the most menial slaves, to grind in the prison-house. In this dark dungeon, with the light of day clean gone for ever, he lies imprisoned. Meantime, the Philistines—all their nobles, priests, and magnates of

every description—gather themselves into the chief temple of their god, Dagon, to celebrate with due magnificence their triumph over the downfall of the hero of Jehovah. In the midst of their revelry, the idea occurs to some one of having out the blinded Samson. No sooner said than done; and while they perpetrate all sorts of cruel jests upon him, and exult in their victory over his God and himself, the sense of revived strength seems to take possession of him. In one last determined desire to do something for his God and his people, he bids his guide lead him to the two central pillars on which the great roof of the temple, covered with people, was supported, and drags the pillars down, and buries the pride and flower of the Philistine nation with himself in one common ruin.

Such is the story. All thoughtful and candid students of the Bible feel that it is an extraordinary narrative, with features that differentiate it from the rest of Old Testament history. There are elements in it that remind us strangely of Greek and Roman mythology. Accordingly a great many scholars conclude that it is simply a myth; that these weird and picturesque stories of gigantic strength depict the operations of the sunshine, as, for example, in the burning of the corn. In confirmation, they point out that Samson's name, in Hebrew, means "the sunny one." I, for one, do not believe this, and the best scholars, even the most unbelieving of them, reject this view. The story is too real and life-like to be treated in such a fashion. Besides, there are in it far greater divergences from Greek mythology than there are real affinities.

Others, again, say that this is manifestly a real story, though with much poetical exaggeration, and with no religious purport, of a rough, lustful man who fought the Philistines. On the other hand, the Bible history states that Samson fought for God and righteousness, for the progress of God's kingdom on earth, and assigns him a

place in the grand procession of those who prepared the way for Jesus Christ. Either a New Testament writer is mistaken, or else it is we who are blind and wanting in insight if we fail to find in Samson's history solid ground for maintaining that, in spite of all his imperfections, he did, in his way and with his gifts, perform the work that built up true religion, and helped forward the progress of God's kingdom, and prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ. That there are difficulties, I own; but for myself I feel justified in saying that I can perfectly comprehend how a place in the roll of Old Testament heroes is assigned to Samson by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The God of the Bible is no abstract creation of human thought. He is the God that made this strange earth, with its animals that prey on one another, its earthquakes and tempests and floods; the God of life and of death, who made love and joy, but also worked into His design sin, disease, and death; the God that made human intellect, capacity, and skill, but that also left man to fight his own way through the world, and to learn through his blunders and errors; the God that does not supply everything ready made, but that gives us eyes and minds and hearts and consciences, and the material to use them on. Just as we must work out for ourselves the better form of government and the more perfect social order, so it is better for us to seek the truth than to get it without effort, to fight our own battles, and to rise above our sins to self-conquest and self-devotion. And the loftiness of character men reach so is all the greater, because the soul of it is humility,—the tenderness of penitence and gratitude for sin forgiven. With such a conception of God's discipline of men, I do not find it so hard to fit this brave-hearted—yea, this lustful Samson, into God's work in our world.

The Bible judgment of sins is very different from ours. We make distinctions which it does not recognise. When

I take my New Testament, I find in the list of deadly sins, classed in equal terms, murder, adultery, fornication, love of money, lying, hard-heartedness, pride, vainglory, hypocrisy. We should be more tender and charitable than we are when we find the lives of great and noble men marred by sins for which we choose to excommunicate them, and more humble and lowly in our own claim to be ourselves servants of God and soldiers of Christ. If you admit these to be true positions, then I ask you to read the story of Samson in the light of them.

Two things stand out in the narrative of Samson's career, as compared with the history of, at least the majority, of the other judges. (1) The other judges fight God's battles with the people at their backs. They simply give aid and point to a sense of rising strength, of impatience of subjection, of reviving national pride and religious zeal in the Hebrew people. Samson, on the contrary, stands utterly alone, fights his battle single-handed, is supported by no enthusiasm for the national cause, and not even by common loyalty on the part of his own comrades. (2) The other judges are chosen to their office as mature men, but Samson is set apart to his career as an unborn child. From his very infancy the sense of his vocation takes possession of him; as child and boy and youth, it is making and moulding him, and preparing him for what he is to be. The explanation of these two characteristic features of his history, which distinguish it from that of the other judges, lies in this, that Samson's lot in life fell upon a period of utter national demoralization.

As time goes on, we learn how the method of government by judges broke down in Israel, and was abandoned for government by a king. Its utter inefficiency was manifested by the condition of apathy into which Israel had now fallen. They had lapsed into subjection to the despised, uncircumcised Philistines. All national spirit was dying

out, and the prestige of Jehovah was giving way before the prestige of Dagon. Jehovah's people are a conquered, tax-paying, Philistine-ridden race. Dagon is triumphant over Jehovah; he is the strong god, Jehovah the weak God. Now the only hope for the redemption of a society that has fallen into a condition of such lassitude, mental and moral, lies in the creation of a fresh and powerful personality. All through the world's history you find that, when a people's life has fallen into the mire and become impotent, its recovery begins in the sudden meridian of a great personality. Indeed, just because God is in human history, such periods seem to produce, as it were, by an inevitable reaction, their own remedies; just as the blighting curse of strong drink is met and fought by the other extreme of total abstinence. So in Samson's time, when the social order, resting on specially selected and temporary judges, had broken down, and religion and patriotism were dwindling and dying out, the popular life produced, by way of recoil, two extraordinary phenomena. The first was the order of the Nazarites; the second, the order of the prophets. Samson represented the Nazarite, Samuel the prophet. Mark the significance of the Nazarite. The religious conception of Israel in its relation to God was that the whole people were God's body on earth. He dwelt among them, lived in them, wrought through them. But the mass of the people were utterly incapable of realizing such an ideal, and the presence of God in Israel became concentrated in and represented by certain orders of men,—the priests, the prophets, the Nazarites. Those three religious orders run all through Hebrew history. The Nazarites were ascetics,—the total abstainers, the religious fanatics of the times. They kept their hair uncut, as the external mark of their consecration to God. In protest against those habits of luxury and self-indulgence that led by a natural tendency into Baal-worship, they abstained from the produce of the

grape, and indeed, in many cases, denounced the culture of the grape. They occupied precisely the same position which the total abstainer occupies among ourselves. The Nazarites represented, in all the great epochs of Hebrew history, the inevitable and salutary (salvatory) recoil from irreligion and immorality.

To return to the story of Samson. If there is any hope for Israel in its present condition of moral and religious apathy, it lies in the appearance and power of a great and strong personality. For the most part, society moves on without consciousness of the primitive forces. It lives at second hand, on what has been won for it. And while it has still vitality and manhood enough to make it capable of being stirred by some lofty enthusiasm, at such a time its awakened spirit can possess a man, and mould and transform him, and shape him to be its leader and exponent. This is the story of the other judges, who were carried forward on such a tide of national enthusiasm. When however society has become so emasculated, paralysed, and impotent as to be incapable of a large, general enthusiasm, this happens: God, who is ever caring and working for social progress, drags down into the original depths the new forces and motive-powers that are born in the character of a man—some great religious or social reformer, or some mighty thinker, or some minister, who takes possession in the name of humanity of new forces of physical nature, and gives a new outlet to population, commerce, and industry. This is the explanation of the story of Samson. In this way he was chosen before his birth for his vocation, and shaped to fulfil it. For this reason he had to fight his battles single-handed, unsustained by any popular enthusiasm.

How, humanly speaking, was Samson prepared for his work? To begin with, God made a cradle and a home for him. Samson's mother was a woman with a great soul and

a large heart, to whom God was a reality; a woman who could not indeed fight God's battles and deliver God's people, but who lived with the upper storeys of her being in the unseen, and was possessed with a tremendous longing that there should be deliverance for Israel, that something heroic should appear in history, and that God should vindicate His might and grandeur above the heathen gods. Samson was born to a mother that longed for a boy, not that he might rise to comfort and ease, but that he might be lofty and heroic, and fight and, if need be, die for God and God's kingdom. To her son she transmits her hope, faith, and enthusiasm. Can you measure the might of a motherhood like that? Such a mother can make men saints and heroes.

Again. From a little child Samson felt something mysterious stirring in his soul, ay, and in his physical nature. True, it was through that strong flesh of his that he fell. What then? If men of majestic intellect, and splendid achievements, and noble dreams, and the power of self-sacrifice be dragged down, stained and marred by besetting lusts and sins, are men of puny natures competent to judge such geniuses, who are exposed to extra temptation by reason of those very gifts of God that make it possible for them to do, for God and man, more than other men could do? I do not justify the sins of Samson, I simply put the question: Are we, any of us, who are doing God's work, guiltless of hypocrisy, half-heartedness, and worldliness? And shall we judge this man, who lived in another world from ours, and was exposed to strong temptations by the very qualities that made him serviceable to his age and God? God's heroes are not spotless. God takes them, if they will take Him.

Samson needed extraordinary gifts for extraordinary work. He had, single-handed, by his own solitary prowess, to cow the Philistines and reanimate the courage of the

Hebrews. Two things were needful for him: (1) extraordinary strength, (2) inextinguishable joyousness. To hold his own amid the abject depression of the people round about him, it was essential that he should be possessed of exuberant mirth and jollity. It is the men that do the most serious and earnest work that can play and romp and laugh with their children. That is not the noisy laughter of the fool.

Once again: it may be that asceticism is demanded for our age, just as Nazaritism was for Samson's. But that, remember, is the bad remedy of a still worse evil. Jesus Christ was no ascetic, else his enemies would not have published, as the likeliest scandal about Him, that He was a wine-bibber.

Samson's strength came, not from his hair, but from God. "The Spirit of God came powerfully upon him." I wish we Trinitarians did believe in God's Spirit more than we do, as a living power in practical, every-day life. God's Spirit gives the clever workman his skill, and the artist his visions of beauty and technical deftness of hand. God's Spirit stirs up the brave man to do his duty, and gives the martyr courage to die unflinchingly. And God's Spirit was in those heroes of old. Does this reduce our conception of the supernatural awfulness of the processes of redemption and sanctification,—the work of the Spirit of God, who convinces men of sin and renews them again in the image of Christ? Surely not! But it brings the solemnity and sacredness of religion down into all that we call secular and common. God's Spirit is in our physical, mental, and moral life, quite as much as in our spiritual life. The supernatural of the Bible is nothing more than the natural of every-day life become articulate. Every man of real, original genius will tell you that his best thoughts, his most wonderful achievements, came to him. He was preparing, seeking, searching, trying to accomplish something, and

could not. Suddenly a flash of light was cast upon him,—a great wave of might lifted him out of himself and carried him away. It came to him!

The supernatural strength of Samson was undoubtedly accompanied by a proper physique. The motive-power had a strongly built engine on which to operate. But it is noteworthy that Samson is not described as a giant. He was no monster like Goliath, who had only that physical strength of which a little skill can make an end. The impression we derive from the story is that Samson was a well-made man, but not of enormous proportions. Much of his power is attributable to the character of the man: the skill, the wit, the unexpectedness of what he does, the audacity, the daring, the flash of his eye. But more than all, it is the impression he gives of supernatural power behind him, his own consciousness of the Spirit of God flashing out in all he does, the strange and weird prestige established around him, that gave him his extraordinary ascendancy over his enemies. A personality like Samson's means a perilous exposure to the entrance into him and the mastery over him of the physical forces that were around him. No man lives his life *in vacuo*. The magnetic, emotional, passionate energy of Samson, so full of vivacity, meant for him an intensely sensitive and susceptible relation to all around that stirred the passions and forces of the flesh. A little man is saved by his littleness from the perils of a giant or a genius. All through the story, moreover, you see how God made use of Samson's lapses into sin to embroil him with the Philistines. Sin is not to be justified; but in estimating the character of Samson, we must take account of the way in which God sometimes over-rules men's evil deed to lift them to a loftier career.

I am astonished at those rationalistic critics who mock at the story of Samson, and ridicule it as low and ignoble.

If it was such a poor and vulgar affair, how came it that he occupies a place among the saints and sages of the Old Testament, and that his story is preserved while so much else is thrown aside? And how was it that every Hebrew was proud of Samson, and that he was loved more than all the other judges? Ah! there must have been something grand and noble in the man. We feel his strange attractiveness. He was such a real man; his wit, humour, irony, his very sins and weaknesses, bring him near to us. Remember how, when the Philistines demanded him, and the men of Judah made the cowardly proposition that he should give himself up to save their property from being plundered, the big-souled man replies, "Yes; make me your sacrifice." There is a touch of Samson's nobility!

But I go on to the last scene in Samson's life. Note the danger that lurked in his vocation. A virtue or a religion that rests on an extreme is unstable. His Nazaritism exposed him to the risk of becoming presumptuous, of trusting in his external calling to be God's, and forgetting that the very core and kernel of his vocation and his power lay in his heart-loyalty to God. In this way he fell. For the love of a harlot he risked his Divine vocation. That meant that God had lost hold of him; and so the sunny, strong, triumphant, merry Samson is in a dungeon, grinding in chains at a mill, with his eyes put out, his hair cut, and his strength gone!

Try to picture the man in the light of the tragic end of his life, and you will see much that is not rough, or rude, or vulgar. Think of that great heart, that brave soul, that man that so loved the sunshine and his liberty and his strength. Oh the degradation, the bitter remorse and upbraiding! He did not blame Delilah; he did not blame God; he blamed himself, and his own reckless madness, that had flung such a great career away. And beyond all, there was the horrible dread that he had been cast off by

God for ever; no strength coming to him now in his prison; no voice of God. Had he lost God, and the light of God, as well as the light of the sun? Ah! and no comfort came to him for many a long day! He did not know it was on the way. But his hair was growing, and he was recovering, though slowly, as from a great fall. There is a way to heaven even from the very gate of hell.

The poor, blinded hero goes into that temple, stumbling, and laughed at as he stumbles; he is jeered and mocked; he is dazed and broken-hearted. But, I think, suddenly his ear caught that mocking song of praise to Dagon, that exalted Dagon as the conqueror of Jehovah and of Samson. And the inspiration came to him: still his name is associated with that of Jehovah; and they are mocking, not him, but Jehovah! Oh! perchance he may still reckon that he and Jehovah stand and fall together; and perchance Jehovah counts it so too! Suddenly there came to him, like an echo from the past, that strange movement in his soul, a sense of the Divine *afflatus*, an inspiration, a dim consciousness that his strength had returned to him; and then the swift resolve. If only he could do one deed that would undo the injury to Jehovah and Jehovah's people he had done; ah! if he died in doing it, perchance he would sooner die than live with his eyes put out, and the everlasting record of his shame written in his body. But to die for Jehovah and for Jehovah's people! And so he got his arms over the pillars, and a great cry went up from his great heart to God to give him power to do one thing and wipe out a shameful past. He bowed himself, dragged those pillars down, and died, surrounded by the overwhelming ruin of the pride and flower of all Philistia. Through Judah and Ephraim the story went; every Hebrew heart was fired and worshipped Jehovah; and the faith of Jehovah shone out. They came through the panic-stricken, cowed Philistines, and they bore his mangled

remains from that ruined temple, and they laid him in the grave. And so, with all his sins, his fall and shame, but with his great repentance, and his large, brave heart, and his love and loyalty to men and to God, they wrote over his grave that he was a true man of God, and a hero of God's kingdom on earth. The Epistle to the Hebrews needs no justification in endorsing that verdict and counting Samson among God's heroes.

W. G. ELMSLIE.

### THE ARAMAIC GOSPEL.

#### INDICATIONS OF TRANSLATION.

IN our February paper we endeavoured to show that there are four kinds of textual discrepancies to which Semitic texts are liable in the process of transcription: (1) The diverse vocalization of the same consonants; (2) the interchange of similar letters; (3) the omission of one or more letters; (4) the transposition of two consecutive letters. We illustrated this by showing that the quotations in the New Testament from the Old give clear and abundant evidence that the Hebrew text from which they were translated differed in *each* of these ways from the current Massoretic text preserved in our Hebrew Bibles. The reason why our New Testament quotations differ from the Old is, in almost all cases, that they were based on MSS. which differed in the ways indicated from our present Hebrew text. It may be instructive to the thoughtful student to illustrate these modes of divergence in another way. It is admitted by modern scholars, almost without exception, that Psalm xviii. and 2 Samuel xxii. are two slightly variant copies of what was originally the same psalm. The differences between the two are very much