



Scenes from the Old Testament

Samson and Delilah

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Judges 16: 10–22 Hebrews 11: 32–end

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Samson and Delilah* (c. 1610),
The National Gallery, London¹

Samson, mighty Samson: the long-haired superhero of the Old Testament, with the strength to tear apart a lion with his bare hands. Samson is a murderer, an arsonist and a womaniser. He murders 30 men to pay off a bet that went wrong, sets fire to enemy Philistine crops and vineyards in a jealous rage over his wife, and kills a thousand men with the jawbone of a donkey. Samson is a wild, friend-less, liminal character. As a Nazirite, one set apart for God, he is empowered by God's spirit and yet rarely uses it for God's own purposes; he is something of a man-child, caught between the women he falls for and his parental home, refusing to take responsibility for his actions and always acting on impulse for his own gain.

Hardly what we might expect of a hero of the faith, as he is described in the New Testament reading we heard this evening. Neither is Samson the kind of character we might expect when we read about the dramatic announcement of his birth by an angel of God, or what we might expect from a Nazirite – one set apart for God, let alone from a judge of Israel – one called by God to lead and save his people. Samson above all the characters in the Hebrew Bible should give Jewish and Christian leaders hope that God can work with the most flawed of human beings...

But the story of Samson is a tragic one, albeit with comedic elements. His lover, Delilah, has taken a bribe from the group of Philistine rulers who want to rid their land of this Israelite terrorist (or freedom-fighter, depending on how you look at him), and she repeatedly cries that he does not love her enough to disclose the secret of his great strength. He fobs her off with different strategies for weakening him – binding him with fresh bowstrings, binding him with ropes, tying his hair to a loom. She tries each of these but each time the trickster Samson breaks free and the men lying in wait to seize him are frustrated.

Eventually though, Delilah succeeds in wearing him down with her nagging. The narrator tells us that Samson was 'tired to death', a forewarning of what is to come. So, Samson gives in; he tells her that he is a Nazir – he has never had his hair cut off. She soothes him to sleep, childlike on her lap, calls someone for help, has his hair shaved off, and

¹ <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/peter-paul-rubens-samson-and-delilah>

his strength does indeed leave him. The Philistines gleefully seize him and gouge out his eyes – he is literally blinded because of his love for Delilah. The Philistines imprison him and force him to grind at the mill, a job usually reserved for women or children. They then bring him out as entertainment at a feast to their god Dagon and mock him. It is at this point that Samson finally turns to God for help. He prays for the strength to lean against the pillars of the building, which collapses, killing Samson himself along with about 3000 Philistine men and women. The narrator observes with tragic humour that Samson killed more people in his death than he did in his life.

On one level Samson is remembered as a local hero, a one-man resistance against the oppressive power of the day. On another, this is a tragic story of a potential leader who woefully abuses and misuses the divine power with which he is endowed, and is betrayed by the one person he loves. It is also an interesting reflection on the dynamics of male and female power. As so often in the Hebrew Bible, the characters in this story are not easily judged as either saints or sinners.

So what are we supposed to learn from this complex story? Let us turn to Rubens' portrait to see what light he sheds on it. The artist captures here the moment of dramatic tension before Samson's fate is sealed. Delilah is painted in red, as a prostitute, in an overtly sexual scene. This perhaps harks back, with some artistic license, to the previous episode where Samson does visit a prostitute, and escapes from a band of men lying in wait to capture him. Rubens also embellishes the story with the figure of an old woman (a female pimp perhaps?) – who holds a candle to illuminate Delilah's betrayal at the centre of the painting. Her face and Delilah's are side by side, perhaps suggesting Delilah's fate, or representing the distortion of Delilah's beauty by her treachery. Samson, at the centre of the painting, displays his strong back with rippling muscles, but his curved posture, draped over Delilah's lap, presents his vulnerability. He has been overwhelmed by love and desire and forgotten his calling. The upright figures on the right hand side are the Philistines lying in wait, ready to seize him – their treachery is also illuminated, this time by a torch, perhaps reminiscent of the torch used by Samson earlier in the story to set fire to their crops. At the top of the painting, the hanging purple drape fore-shadows Samson's suffering. In the centre, Delilah's hand rests on his back, heightening the sense of betrayal.

It is always surprising to me how much we are influenced by artistic representations of biblical stories. After looking at this picture, it is hard to read the story without the image of Delilah the seductress, the betrayer, dominating our view. The story certainly highlights the dangers of falling for women, particularly foreign women, and of men's eyes leading them astray. If we see Samson as symbolic of Israel, we can also see his sexual exploits that get him into trouble as symbolic of Israel's chasing after other gods.

But have a look at Delilah's **face**, because there is real ambivalence there. How much choice did she actually have in all this? We are told that Samson loved her, but know nothing of her thoughts or feelings. She was a woman – perhaps Philistine, perhaps Israelite. Her name is a Hebrew one, meaning either delicate or amorous, and she lived on the border of Israelite/Philistine territory. If a group of powerful lords of the land turn up on your doorstep with an extortionate amount of money, what power would you really have had to say no? Is she also *completely* to blame for Samson telling her the real secret

of his strength? The story is ridiculous in some ways – Delilah didn't exactly hide the reasons for wanting to know his secret, and surely he would have realised her plan, when three times she cries, 'Samson! The Philistines are upon you!'

What the painting does not help us to see, then, is Samson's arrogance and folly. He has openly flouted the other Nazirite laws, which prohibit him from drinking alcohol or eating anything unclean. Perhaps he has not made the connection between this and the devastating events that have unfolded in his life. Perhaps he thought that he could just break free again, because his strength was really his own – he didn't need to follow any laws or keep any promises. And God wouldn't leave him. But God does leave him. The narrator tells us, 'When Samson awoke from his sleep, he thought "I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free." But he did not know that the Lord had left him.'

It is not until Samson is blinded that he can see. It is not until he has been weakened that his strength is returned to him. It is in this sense that the writer of the Hebrews can describe him as finding strength out of weakness. Samson's faith in God and his humility in asking for help only appears in his weakness. The only two times that Samson addresses God in the story are when he is dying of thirst and at the end when he is blind.

This paradox of strength in weakness and power in humility is central to the Christian narrative and is at the heart of the Gospel. But this is neither easy nor popular. We humans do not like to be reminded of our vulnerability, of our need for God and for others, of our fragility. We are hard-wired as human beings to want to be in control, to be self-sufficient, independent. It is hard to trust in God, when we are used to relying only on ourselves.

When I was a second-year undergraduate I broke my ankle playing hockey (Selwyn vs Jesus). I had to use crutches for a couple of months while my leg was in plaster and it was winter and the pavements were icy. I was leaving a Hebrew class at 6 o'clock one evening and heading back towards college when I slipped and fell crashing onto my knees, my crutches splayed out beside me. Quite aside from the additional pain this caused, I was overcome with rage and humiliation. A passer-by paused and offered help, but in my anger I politely said that I was fine and then took several minutes struggling to get back on my feet by myself. How much easier it would have been to respond with humility and patience, to recognise my need and to graciously accept the help that was offered.

Samson's strength gave him the arrogance to think he no longer needed to follow God's laws nor needed God's help. It is no accident that Samson has no friends. But when his strength was taken away, he did stop and ask for help, trusting that God would help him. Our physical strength, health, intelligence, or beauty – whatever gifts we may have, will always carry with them the potential for arrogance and pride, and therefore also the potential for tripping us up and leading us into dark places where we cannot see and where we forget to look for God and where we forget to look **to** God.

Intelligence is an obvious stumbling block of pride in this town. Huge intellectual gifts are sitting all around us, as are incredible gifts of voices, musical ability and sporting prowess. It is easy to seek our identity and security in these things. But if we can remember and hold onto an awareness that such gifts we are given are just that: gifts – then we are less likely to place undue confidence in them, to envy them in others, or to bind them closely with our very sense of self. If we can remember that they are gifts, good gifts,

we can rather turn to God and be thankful, acknowledging that they are good, but both transient and fragile. We can accept these gifts, knowing that if and when these things pass away, that God will still be God and we will still be God's children. If we place too much confidence in our own strength or intelligence, when they fail us, as inevitably they will, we feel humiliated rather than humbled. We suffer humiliation, shame and rage, uncomfortable with our limitations, rather than responding with humility, and patient acceptance.

The hymn we sang at the beginning of the service speaks of this very humility that is at the heart of the Christian story. Through Christ we are invited to turn to God for help, knowing that He humbled himself and entered into humanity's fragility and vulnerability. We are invited to turn to God, knowing that God drew near to us that we might draw near to him.

All praise to thee, for thou, O King divine,
didst yield the glory that of right was thine,
that in our darkened hearts thy grace might shine: Alleluya.