

Erik Eynikel – Tobias Nicklas (eds.), *Samson: Hero or Fool? The Many Faces of Samson* (Themes in Biblical Narrative: Jewish and Christian Traditions 17; Leiden: Brill 2014). Pp. x + 244. €109. ISBN 978-90-04-26217-1

JACEK STEFAŃSKI

Wigierski Areopag Nowej Ewangelizacji
e-mail: jfstefanski@gmail.com

This book is a collection of fourteen articles (thirteen in English and one in German) originally delivered as talks at the international conference *Samson: Hero or Fool?* at the University of Nijmegen in April, 2008.

The opening article by Elie Assis, *The Structure and Meaning of the Samson Narratives (JUD. 13–16)* (1-12) explores Samson's penchant for women. Assis sees the behavior of Samson as motivated by lust and shows how Samson fails to control his desires to the point of readiness to give up his life in exchange for pleasure. Assis notes how this behavior fits into a broader picture of man's inability to help himself without God's assistance (11).

In *The Many Faces of Samson* (13-31) J. Cheryl Exum suggests that Samson cannot be fitted into a single category. She asserts that it is love that leads to his downfall and looks at his saga as a moral lesson, a story about a hero, a freedom fighter, a terrorist, a xenophiliac, a comic figure, a tragic figure, a trickster, the personification of Israel, a Nazirite and a judge. Exum observes that reading Samson's history, one must make use of "different approaches to the text", various "reading strategies, presuppositions, perspectives and questions" (29).

Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher in *A Hero Enslaved in Otherness? Literary Images of Samson* (33-51) looks at the Samson biblical story as adapted and incorporated by twentieth century literary works. She expands on Samson's "otherness" as the key to unlock Samson's personality and behavior – first in the biblical text and then in modern retellings. Gillmayr-Bucher notes that "Samson does not belong and he does not meet the expectations raised in the text" (38). She characterizes him as "the exemplary other" who challenges traditions and values. Being different, striving to weave between faithfulness to his identity and the attractions which another culture offers, dodging between patriotism and love and even switching gender roles with Delilah are some of the questions which Gillmayr-Bucher addresses through modern literary extrapolations of Samson's biblical portrayal.

Lara van der Zee's *Samson and Samuel: Two Examples of Leadership* (53-65) is an attempt to determine whether Samson can be considered a judge in light of his behavior. She compares Samson with other Judges, but primarily with the prophet Samuel who exemplifies all the qualities that a leader should have. For van der Zee, leadership is the most pressing issue in the Book of Judges and Samson turns out to be a failed leader (65).

Cornelis Houtman, in *Who Cut Samson's Hair? The Interpretation of Judges 16:19A Reconsidered* (67-85) attempts to establish the identity of the person who cut Samson's hair by looking at the Hebrew, Latin and Greek biblical texts of Judges 16:19a. Even though Delilah is said to have performed the deed, it becomes evident that the anonymous man invited by her seems to have done it. Houtman bases his argument primarily on the physical position Samson takes as he sleeps. To clarify this point, a reference is made to various art works to show the possible interpretations of the verse.

Analyzing the old Greek text of the Samson cycle in *The Septuagint Reading of the Samson Cycle* (87-99), Natalio Fernandez Marcos examines the translation of the masoretic text. He looks at nonliteral translations which are performed for the purpose of greater coherence and nonliteral translations which insert new ideas, not present in the Hebrew text. Marcos suggests that the social background and climate of the Hellenistic translator during the Seleucid persecution comes to the fore in the translation.

Ronit Nikolsky, in *Rabbinic Discourse about Samson: Continuity and Change between the Tannaitic Culture to the Amoraic* (101-118), examines the variations which occur in the Samson accounts in Tannaitic and Amoraic texts. Tannaitic literature diminishes Samson's qualifications for leadership, frowns upon the kind of Nazirite vows that characterized Samson's religious life and considers his sin to be in the act of disobeying his parents as well as going after the enticement of his eyes. The Amoraic literature takes on the same general attitude, but it brings to light some new motifs which – in turn – depict Samson more favorably. Nikolsky observes that the approach of Amoraic literature is rooted in the different cultural circumstances of the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods.

In *Of Valour and Strength: The Samson Cycle in Josephus' Work: Jewish Antiquities 5.276-317* (119-128), Tessel M. Jonquiere examines the retelling of Samson's history by Josephus Flavius. Jonquiere shows that Josephus portrays Samson more favorably by toning down any immoral biblical references to Samson's behavior. Josephus justifies Samson's actions through recourse to human weakness which is attenuated by his achievements, bravery, strength and zeal in fighting against the enemy. Furthermore, Josephus' account presents Samson as a hero who "has much less to do with God" than the biblical Samson (125) and as a figure to be imitated by Josephus' non Jewish contemporaries.

Tobias Nicklas, in *Kein Simson im Neuen Testament?* (129-143), notes that, at first glance, Samson is only mentioned once in the New Testament, in Hebrews 11:32. Nicklas points out that there are other, less apparent references in the New Testament which could allude to Samson. The general statement in Hebrews 13:2 that some have entertained angels unawares could correspond to the meeting of Samson's parents with an angel. In addition, references to the "Nazarene" and to a child "holy to the Lord" in Mt 2:23 and Lk 1:35, respectively, bear resemblance to the characterization of Samson in the Septuagint. The presentation of the birth of John the Baptist and Christ with the birth of Samson in the background throws some positive light on Samson's history. This makes him fit to be placed on par with other Old Testament heroes whose faith the Letter to the Hebrews proposes for imitation.

Erik Eynikel's *Samson in Islamic Literature and in the Old Testament* (145-159) compares Samson in the Old Testament with his depiction in Islam. While Samson does not appear in the Quran, he is discussed in other Islamic literature which describes his blindness as self-inflicted and adds that he castrated himself. Such portrayal of Samson could have been the result of Muslim Sufi glorification of asceticism under the mixed influence of various religions. Islam also emphasizes Samson's strength more than the biblical account does. Likewise, those elements which the biblical account presents as sinful, Islam turns into examples of virtue by explaining them away through the alteration of details or their embellishment.

The role of Samson in music is taken up by Kees Wisse in *Samson in Music* (161-176). The interaction between the Bible and the theater has produced numerous plays with biblical themes. Wisse provides a historical survey of theatrical works, where Samson is referred to either directly or indirectly. From little known composers (e.g. Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre) to more widely known ones (e.g. Handel), with a sample of oratorios and operas, Wisse shows that it is not so much the details in the biblical account, but rather single scenes which have served as a catalyst for theatrical presentations and musical pieces. Artistic imagination is used to portray Samson as a man who either fascinates or draws sympathy.

Karen Schöpflin's *Samson in European Literature: Some examples from English. French and German Poetry* (177-196) examines what various literary works have done to Samson's character and why writers have chosen to portray him in their works. Wisse analyzes Geoffrey's Chaucer's *The Monk's Tale*, Hans Sachs' *Tragedia, Mit 17 Personen, der Richter Simson*, John Milton's *Samson's Agonists* and Alfred de Vigny's *La Colere de Samson*. Chaucer is mainly interested in the tragic interaction of heroism and foolishness at the face of temptation. Sachs is concentrating on the manner in which Samson prefigures

the sufferings of Christ and His ultimate victory over death and sin. Milton and de Vigny sympathize with Samson due to their own similar life experiences (physical blindness and unsuccessful marriage). This leads to their unfavorable approach to women and sympathetic appreciation of men who, in spite their lowliness, strive for excellence.

Klaas Spronk, in *The Looks of a Hero: Some Aspects of Samson in Fine Arts* (197-209), goes over the most accentuated qualities of Samson in works of art. Strength and beauty are the prevalent characteristics in Samson's depictions from the 17th to the 19th century. The 20th century brings a change of attitude in so far as the misery of Samson is emphasized, especially through the prism of particular artists' personal experiences. Spronk also notes the recurring motif of "seeing" through the frequent use of the Hebrew verb "to see" (ראה) in Judges 14-16 and surveys works of art that concentrate on this aspect (Rembrandt, Rigaud, van Dyck, Steen and Solomon).

Obsessive Love: Samson and Delilah go to the Movies (211-235) by Reinhold Zwick is a historical overview of movies which have Samson as their theme. Samson's history, as portrayed in the Bible, has all the elements that make it a fitting material for movie scripts. Zwick points out, however, that while Samson might be on a movie's label, the actual Samson in the movie may have little to do with the biblical figure (214). Zwick looks at three movies (produced by C.B. DeMille, L. Phillips and N. Roeg), in order to show how biblical elements are altered and interpreted through the lens of current events, idiosyncrasies of human nature, theological problems of sin and conversion as well as political aspirations.

The multifaceted nature of this book helps the reader gain further insights into the biblical text and may inspire continued reflection. Recourse to Hebrew – even when the theme is not exegetical in nature (e.g. Spronk) – attests to the value of interdisciplinary exchange among various areas of study. Nevertheless, there are some instances where insights drawn from Hebrew terminology seem exaggerated. Accordingly, one may question Assis's and Houtman's claim about the erotic connotation of the Hebrew term for "chamber" (6-7) and "knees" (71). In addition, Exum's characterizations of Samson as "suicide bomber" or "suicide pillar-puller" (18) would be more appropriate for a tabloid than for a scholarly publication. At the same time, van der Zee's assertion that "Samson was not a judge" (59) raises the question whether a 21st century reader is permitted to reach such a conclusion which clearly departs from the biblical assertion (Judges 15:20; 16:31). By the same token, when discussing various phenomena in the historical context of Christianity from a 21st century perspective, it is necessary to distinguish between correct Apostolic interpretation of Scripture and individual erroneous interpretations which led to excesses. This distinction seems to

be pushed aside with Eynikel's assertion that certain sayings of Jesus inspired Christians to castrate themselves (150).

While Rabbinic exegesis and an analysis of the Greek text of Samson's saga is well represented in the Book, the absence of at least one chapter on Patristic exegesis is a significant drawback. Also, even though a helpful scriptural index is provided, a thematic index would have been helpful, as well as a distinct conclusion at the end of each chapter. Sometimes summaries are blended into the text (29-30, 50, 233-234) or altogether missing (205-208). Moreover, it is perplexing to find a whole chapter in German (129-143) in a book published entirely in English. There are even two chapters with selections from German (48-49) and French (165) poetry without any English translation.

The book as a whole could use more editorial polishing. There are some typographical and grammatical errors (92 [Hebrew], 94, 109, 124, 149, 215) as well as instances, where particular sentences lack clarity (e.g. "Samson does not see the 'otherness'" – 36).

All in all, the book leaves the reader with a conviction that biblical intertextuality and interaction between various fields of study and imagination can further one's interest not only in the person of Samson, but also in the manner in which he could be portrayed. The authors are to be commended for a plethora of insights as an expression of the complexity and curiosity which Samson has evoked over time. They confirm that Scripture is pertinent at all times and can be useful in answering existential questions while expanding man's understanding of the environment in which he lives. It is unfortunate, though, that readers had to wait six years for such a publication to see the light of day.