

# Commentary

JUDGES 16.23-30

□ So familiar is this tale to those of us who heard it first in Sunday school, we find it difficult to read it as anything other than a story, grim but satisfying, of the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

For once, God does what Hollywood would have him do, and unleashes against the heathen Israel's answer (three thousand years before his time) to John Rambo: the man from Dan.

Hebrews 11.32 goes so far as to name him among the heroes of faith, along with Gideon, David, Samuel and the prophets.

Yet Samson is a huge embarrassment to those who like their morals simple and their theology systematic – and never more so than at his death.

We struggle to make him fit our various schemes of virtue and redemption. John Milton tried to represent him as a noble hero in *Samson Agonistes*, God's 'faithful champion' and even a type of Christ.

The *New Bible Dictionary* assures us that by the end his repentance had grown along with his hair.

But there is no trace of contrition in Samson's last words, which bring to a close a life governed entirely by appetite and impulse. He dies in undeniable sin.

We may allow that – whatever law the church has laid down – the Bible does not ever condemn suicide; and, true, the Old Testament sometimes shocks us with an apparent endorsement of wholesale slaughter (see, for example, Joshua 6.17 & 21 and 8.1f & 24ff).

Nonetheless, it is striking that Samson's final prayer infringes two well-known commandments: the prohibition against revenge (Deuteronomy 32.35) and the *lex talionis*, 'an eye for

**Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, 'Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands.' When the people saw him, they praised their god, saying,**

**'Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands, the one who laid waste our land and multiplied our slain.'**

**While they were in high spirits, they shouted, 'Bring out Samson to entertain us.' So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed for them.**

**When they stood him among the pillars, Samson said to the servant who held his hand, 'Put me where I can feel the pillars that support the temple, so that I may lean against them.' Now the temple was crowded with men and women; all the rulers of the Philistines were there, and on the roof were about three thousand men and women watching Samson perform. Then Samson prayed to the Lord, 'O Sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.' Then Samson reached toward the two central pillars on which the temple stood. Bracing himself against them, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, 'Let me die with the Philistines!' Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and all the people in it. Thus he killed many more when he died than while he lived.**

*From the New International Version*

an eye, a tooth for a tooth' (Exodus 21.23ff and Leviticus 24.19f).

And Samson's quarrel with the Philistines was always personal. At the end it is not the plight of God's people that he asks God to remember, only 'me'.

## LIVING FOR PLEASURE

Nor does he show any concern for God's honour. He does not want to bring down Dagon, merely to kill the people who had gouged out his eyes.

His prayer shows no sign of remorse, either for a selfish, dissolute life or for the particular sins that had undone him, but only the trust of a long-indulged child that his father will not say no to him.

(That same trust – some would call it arrogance – is evident in his only other recorded prayer, when after massacring a thousand Philistines he shouts at God:

'You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst?' God duly obliges him by opening up a spring.)

Samson's preternatural strength was given to him by God in response to his childhood dedication as a Nazirite; but of all the Nazirite vows he had kept only one: not to cut his hair.

Otherwise, he had touched a corpse, drunk alcohol and made his body unholy by sleeping with prostitutes (not to say the enemy).

The Book of Judges may recount that he 'led Israel for 20 years' (15.20), yet all his deeds that it records are wholly lacking in wisdom or righteousness. Samson seems to have been a psychopath – filled with the spirit of God.

## DYING FOR REVENGE

Disconcertingly, he was also the spiritual ancestor of the suicide bombers and hijackers of today. He was

the first man to demonstrate that it is possible to kill many more people if you are willing to die with them.

(Ironically, he was a Jew, and it is the people that he hated – for their occupation of his land and their savage reprisals when he defied them – from whom the Palestinians today get their name. The city where his suicide-slaughter took place was Gaza.)

In his final act, as US analysts would say, Samson 'took out' well in excess of a thousand people – men and women, and maybe children, too – and possibly as many as 6,000. Among the dead were most of the Philistine élite.

In the same stroke, he destroyed the building that symbolised their power and prestige: the temple of the god to whom they gave the credit for their success.

This story, awkward as it is, challenges us today, when the twin towers of the World Trade Center, like the two pillars of a pagan temple, have been brought down by vengeful men who wanted to die with the heathen.

Most of the world has been quick to talk in terms of good and evil, guilt and innocence, and to make assumptions about whose side the angels were on.

In the memorial service in St Paul's Cathedral, Prince Philip read a verse that has for centuries been misused by 'Christian' countries: 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Romans 8.31).

But in this story of suicide and mass murder, the Bible presents us with a much more ambiguous picture. Who here is innocent? Who should we feel sorry for? Who stands for justice, and who for civilisation?

And just whose side is God on? **Huw Spinner**