

LITERATURE

THE PORTRAIT OF THE *PHILISTINES* IN JOHN MILTON'S *SAMSON AGONISTES*

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As far as its form is concerned, Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is indebted to Greek tragedy. To Milton drama meant Greek tragic practice, rather than the forms developed by the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Restoration dramatists who, as he says in his preface to the play, made "the error of intermixing comic stuff with tragic sadness and gravity".¹ The sources and analogues of *Samson Agonistes* were many. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides all played a part in its making.² The form of the play and many of its artistic qualities are Greek, but the spirit and the characters are basically Hebraic, drawn from chapter XIII-XIV of the Book of Judges.

Critics who emphasize the Christianity rather than the Hebraism of Milton's play interpret Samson as a prefiguration of Christ. Scott Craig (1952) goes even further with the supposed Christianity of Samson, when he says that "Samson Agonistes is really Christus Agonistes", and, consequently, reads the play as a typological representation of the agony of Christ in Gethsemane.³ This approach has become a critical orthodoxy. Albert R. Cirillo, in a very interesting article (1971), reaches the conclusion that the play is simply a Christian ritualistic drama. The problem with much recent analysis of the

¹ John Milton, "Of that sort of dramatic poem which is call'd tragedy" (Hughes 1957:549). All references to *Samson Agonistes*, identified by line numbers in the text, are from this edition.

² The most comprehensive study of the subject is Parker (1937). According to Parker, Euripides was Milton's favorite Greek dramatist. However, the play resembles Aeschylus', particularly *Prometheus bound*, in its simple plot, concentration on a main figure, and few characters. There are also reminiscences of the *Trachiniae* and of *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles.

³ The best treatment of the "supposed" Christianity of *Samson Agonistes* is undoubtedly Michael Krouse's (1949). See also Landy (1965) and Muldrow (1970).

play — though Rajan's skillful interpretation in *The lofty rhyme* should be excepted — is that it ignores the wise remark of Douglas Bush that in the play "no specifically Christian doctrines are admitted, no clear statement of the working of grace, not even in Samson's immortality ...; no flights of angels sing him to his rest" (1964:200).

I myself do not feel the drama of Samson and the Philistines⁴ Christian. Its power in my mind lies in being the least Christian of all Milton's major works. Milton is at his greatest when he treats the Old Testament rather than the New Testament. The greatness of *Samson Agonistes* as a work of art resides in combining the two cultures to which Milton was most responsive — Hellenism and Hebraism. The play, in short, combines Greek artistic form with Old Testament subject. This does not mean, I should make clear at the outset, that there are no Christian echoes in the play. There are Christian echoes and connotations, but the prevailing and dominant spirit is undoubtedly Hebraic (I am using the word "spirit" here in terms of dominant idea and attitude not of technique). This Hebraic spirit of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* creates a particular perspective from which everything in the play is viewed. The Philistines are thus portrayed according to the standards and convictions of the Hebraic spirit of the Old Testament.

As I have already stated, the story of Samson is drawn from the Book of Judges. Samson was a "judge" of the tribe of Dan (12th c. B.C.). In the Book of Judges, he is mentioned as a tribal leader called judge. It is said that "he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years" (Judg. 15²⁰). However, "there is nothing in the narrative of the Old Testament that Samson actually gave judgements or that he led his people in battle. He was not a judge, a military commander, or a religious leader — but a folk hero of the kind that has captivated the popular mind down the ages, from Hercules to Superman, with feats of incredible strength" (Comay 1971:327—8). Nevertheless, the birth of Samson, described as supernatural, is viewed as the be-

⁴ The name "Philistine" is first found in the Egyptian form *prst* as the name of one of the "People of the Sea", who invaded Egypt in the eighth year of Ramses III (ca. 1188 B.C.). The name also occurs in Assyrian sources as both *Pilisti* and *Palastu*. However, "there is no acceptable Semitic etymology for this name, and it is quite probably of Indo-European origin" (Buttrick 1962:791).

According to the Old Testament, the Philistines came originally from Caphtor, the Hebrew word for Crete (Jer. 47⁴; Amos 9⁷; cf. Deut. 2²³). They settled in Philistia — a name given to the coastal plain of Palestine involving five cities known as the Pentapolis (Gaza, Gath, Ekron, Ashdod, and Ashkelon). For a discussion of the Philistines, see Mitchell (1967). Macalister (1913), though old, is still useful.

The term "Philistines" was used in the middle of the nineteenth century for a person "deficient in liberal culture". Matthew Arnold popularized the term in (1869). Nowadays "it is used of those who oppose innovations in arts" (Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. VII, p. 948).

ginning of Israel's deliverance from what is called "the bondage of the Philistines". Here are the words of the Book of Judges:

And the Children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years. And there was a certain man of Zor-ah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Ma-no-ah; and his wife was barren, and bare not. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not: thou shalt conceive, and bear a son. Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing: For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite⁵ unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines (Judg. 13¹⁻⁵).

The Book of Judges also mentions that the Philistines had "dominions over Israel in Samson's time" (Judg. 14⁴). Samson's war against them is delineated as one-man raids that ultimately ended in his own captivity. The Philistines with the help of Dalila, Samson's wife, who is, interestingly enough, a Philistine, discovered the secret of his power and caught him. Milton's dramatization of the story begins with Samson "eyeless at Gaza"⁶ in Philistines' hands. The play focuses on the episode of Samson's captivity which ends in his pulling down the temple on the Philistines and on himself. However, by means of flashbacks Milton goes back to Samson's conflict with the Philistines that ended in his savage act of revenge. Milton also preserved the details of the Old Testament account with few alternations and modifications. Samson is portrayed as a national hero, a deliverer of the Israelites from the grip of their foes.

The play is therefore a record of a struggle between Samson on one hand and the Philistines of the Pentapolis on the other hand. Samson is fully aware of his role as a deliverer. He says at the beginning of the play:

Promise was that I
Should Israel from Philistine yoke deliver;
Ask for this great deliverer, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves,
Himself in bonds under Philistian Yoke.

(38—42)

⁵ The root meaning of "Nazarite" was "to separate", in the sense that men should "separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate themselves unto the Lord; He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink" (Num. iv. 2-3, and Judg. xiii. 7). See Merritt Hughes (1957: 552 fn. 31).

⁶ "Milton seems to have visualized Gaza as George Sandys described it in his *Travels* (1615) when he says (p. 116): "But now return we unto Gaza, one of the five cities, and the principal that belonged to the Palestines, called Philistines in the Scripture, a warlike and powerful people ... Gaza or Aza signifieth strong" (Hughes 1957:551 fn. 16).

Later in the play, Samson tells Harapha⁷, the champion of Philistia, defiantly that:

My nation was subjected to your Lords,
It was the force of Conquest; force with force
Is well ejected when the conquer'd can.
But I a private person, whom my country
As a league-breaker gave up bound, presum'd
Single Rebellion and did Hostile Acts.
I was no private but a person raid'd
With strength sufficient and command from Heav'n
to free my Country; if their servile minds
Me their Deliverer sent would not receive.
(1205—1214)

The conflict is pictured along national and religious lines. Indeed, the line of demarkation between nationalism and religiosity is so thin to an extent that both words are used interchangeably. The struggle is between Jehovah, the god of Israel, and Dagon⁸, the deity of the Philistines. Dagon is described in *Paradise lost* as a "sea-Monster, upward Man and downward Fish" (*PL I: 462—3*). In *Samson Agonistes* Dagon is given the epithet "sea-idol". Samson visualizes himself as the destroyer of Dagon. Manoah tells his son, Samson, that:

This day the Philistines a popular Feast
Here celebrate in Gaza; and proclaim
Great Pomp, and Sacrifice, and Praises loud
To Dagon, as their God who hath deliver'd
Thee, Samson, bound and blind into their hands,
Them out of thine, who slew'st them many a slain.
(434—439)

Samson, in reply to his father, sums up the basic conflict — the god of Israel against Dagon (449—463), and emphasizes it in his encounter with the giant, Harapha, of Philistia:

In confidence where of I once again
Defy thee to the trial of mortal fight,
By combat to decide whose god is God,
Thine or whom I with Israel's sons adore.
(1174—1177)

⁷ The name "Harapha" is composed of the Hebrew definite article, *ha*, and the word for giant, *raphah*. On the etymology of Harapha's name and his function in the play, see John M. Steadman (1968:185—93) and Goldman (1974).

⁸ "Milton's conception of Dagon as a 'Sea Monster, upward Man and downward Fish' (*PL I: 462—3*) corresponds with the usual derivation of his name from a Semitic root meaning "fish". In Phoenicia his name was connected with the word for corn, *dagan*, and he seems to have been an agricultural deity. His cult, as Judg. xvi, 23, and I Sam. v, indicate, centered in the Philistine cities of Ashdod and Gaza" (Hughes 1957:551—2 fn. 21). Apparently, Dagon was a Canaanite corn god, whose cult was absorbed by the Philistines.

Complementary to this religious/national perspective of Samson is the sequence of qualities and epithets ascribed to the Philistines. Their being "uncircumsized", for example, recurs throughout the play. Dalila, the Philistine heroine, is referred to as "unclean" and "unchaste" (320—321). Dalila's alleged uncleanness and the epithets used to describe the Philistines in the play were the ritual uncleanness of all gentiles with whom even "the bread that was eaten by the Jews was defiled" (Ezek. iv, 13).

Another important element in the play which clearly shows its Old Testament point of view is the insistence on vengeance. The Chorus describes Samson's revenge in pulling the temple down on the Philistines as an act "dearly bought ... yet glorious" (1660). Manoah's concluding speech is a song of rejoice over the plight and annihilation of the Philistines:

Come, come, no time for lamentation now,
Nor much more cause: Samson hath quit himself
like Samson, and heroically hath finish'd
A life Heroic, on his Enemies
Fully reveng'd hath left them years of mourning,
And lamentation to the Sons of Caphtor
Through all Philistian bounds. To Israel
Honor hath left, and freedom, let but them
Find courage to lay hold on this occasion.
(1708—1716)

Milton thus expands Samson's plea, as given in the Book of Judges: "O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, only this once, o God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines, for my two eyes" (16²⁸). As Dale put it, "Milton retains the element of private revenge and couples it with a nationalist bias comparable to that of the Songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus, chapter 15" (1976:381). The bloodthirsty delight of Samson and Manoah is a far cry from the benevolent spirit of forgiveness we find in the New Testament. St. Paul teaches that "avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath" (Romans 12¹⁹). Forgiveness is a distinctively Christian virtue lacking in the world of *Samson Agonistes*. The destruction of the Philistines at the end of the play is received with exultation characteristic of the Hebraic spirit of the Old Testament. The element of revenge makes the play morally repulsive and even disgusting. This fact was unfortunately ignored by E. L. Marilla (1957) who approves of this Hebraic vindictive attitude, when he says that "man must unreservedly commit himself, without regard for possible costs in personal sacrifice, to upholding the ideals that are entrusted to him as a spiritual being". The irony lies in calling revenge a moral. The description of Samson as a "Heaven-sent" deliverer who has the right to butcher at will has lead some scholars, who are more enlightened and objective than Marilla, to call Samson a "sanctified barbarian" (Woodhouse 1959:208), or a "primitive ruffian of a half-savage legend" (Allen 1954:82).

The religious/national conflict between Israel and Philistia as described in the Old Testament treats "things" in terms of black and white. As Anthony Low says in his study of the play: "Israel, as a nation, or an ideal, is good; Philistia, and what it stands for, is depraved" (1974 : 120). The tradition within which Milton is working imposes an unfortunate sense of limitation and restriction on his artistic rendering of the conflict between Israel and Philistia. There are, however, two points that ought to be singled out and stressed. Firstly, Milton, though relying on Old Testament account and perspective, capitalises on the point that the little nation of the Philistines, consisting of five centers known as the Pentapolis, and few hundred square miles, was able to defeat and control the Israelites. Secondly, Milton deviates from the Old Testament narrative, and makes Harapha, the hero of the Philistines, reproach Samson as a murderer and a robber:

Fair honor that thou dost thy God, it trusting
He will accept thee to defend his cause,
A murderer, a Revolter, and a Robber.
(1178—1180)

Samson is also described as physically dirty, dressed in rags, and a companion of slaves (115—26, 340—42, 110—1107, 1160—1163, 1224—1226). Milton insists, with imagery and with direct description, on detailing almost every aspect of Samson's physical degradation. An important element in Samson's degradation that Milton has added to the Book of Judges is the suggestion that Samson is a diseased person suffering from "wounds immedicable" (620). Instances of disease imagery occur in lines 183—84, 571—75, 579, 599—601, 617—32, and 697—704). Any balanced assessment of Samson versus the Philistines must keep these elements in mind. Closer attention to these neglected references and imagery is useful in adding to one's understanding of the play. Though a tribal hero, Samson, when the above-mentioned attributes are considered, is shown as an outlaw and even as a kind of a monster. This description might be a technique of character-isolation⁹, but it stimulates us to see a justification in the Philistine's capture of Samson. The Philistines are here portrayed as acting according to legal and civilized considerations in trapping a murderer and a common enemy. Samson's physical degradation and the imagery of disease strengthen this impression. This is one of the very few instances in the play where Milton deviates from his source to give a bright picture of the Philistines.

In the final scene of the temple, Milton distinguishes the Philistines' nobility from what he calls the "vulgar" crowd outside the temple. The nobility, "Lords, Ladies, Captains, Counsellors, or Priests" are killed (2653—54)

while the "vulgar" crowd standing outside the roofed-in area of the temple escape. This should not be understood, I think, as a sign of modern democracy on Milton's part. Milton was a classical republican, who believed in the rule by merit and excellence and had very little respect for the judgment of the mob. The lords and captains are destroyed because "they are closely associated with and responsible for the policies of Philistia and Dagon" (Low 1974 : 121). Milton's description of the political organization of the Philistines is also derived from the Old Testament. In the *Torah*, we are told of Philistines' lords, the Hebrew word *Seranim* (Judg. 16⁵, Jos. 13³). The *seranim* are distinguished from *sarim* (captains) (1S 29²⁻³). In Milton's play, there is a distinction between lords and officers. Apparently, as we gather from the Old Testament and the play, each Philistine city or center had its independent force and lord, but in time of war they were combined under one command made up of all the lords of the Pentapolis.

Of all the Philistines' characters mentioned in Milton's play Dalila holds the foremost place and significance. She is a Philistine woman married to Samson. She collaborated with her countrymen to discover the secret of Samson's strength, and, ultimately, helped in his capture. Critics sympathetic to the Hebraic view treat Dalila as a temptress and traitress, and, consequently, compare her to Satan in *Paradise lost* and *Paradise regained*.¹⁰ Those critics forget Dalila's famous farewell speech to Samson, where she clearly and squarely states her motives. Let me quote this speech in some length since it conveys the exact and right feelings of Dalila:

My name perhaps among the Circumeis'd
In *Dan*, in *Judah*, and the bordering Tribes,
To all posterity may stand defam'd,
With malediction mention'd, and the blot
Of falsehood most unconjugal traduc't,
But in my country were I most desire,
In *Ekron*, *Gaza*, *Asdod*, and in *Gath*
I shall be nam'd among the famousst
Of women, sung at solemn festivals,
Living and dead recorded, who to save
Her country from a fierce destroyer, chose
Above the faith of wedlock bands, my tomb
With odors visited and annual flowers,
Not less renown'd than in Mount Ephraim,
Jael, who with inhospitable guile
Smote *Sisera* sleeping through the temples nail'd.
Nor shall I count it heinous to enjoy
The public marks of honor and reward
Conferr'd upon me, for the piety
Which to my country I was judg'd to have shown.

⁹ On the theme of Samson's isolation and its variations, see E. M. Tillyard (1930).

¹⁰ See, for example, Thomas Kranidas (1966) and Barbara K. Lewalski (1970).

At this who over envies or repines
I leave him to his lot, and like my own.
(975--996)

Dalila simply betrayed her husband to save her country. In making Dalila Samson's wife, not his mistress as the case is in the Old Testament, Milton sharpens the conflict between matrimonial obligations on one hand and national duty on the other hand. Dalila tells Samson outright that her national and religious duties come first.

Dalila's national and religious motives are further strengthened by a skillful fabric of marine imagery¹¹ that Milton associates with her. Her entrance in the play is announced by the means of a ship-simile. She approaches Samson "Like a stately Ship/Of Tarsus" (714-715). Samson is unable to fight the sea's force: "who like a foolish pilot have shipwrecked, /My Vessel trusted to me from above/, Gloriously rigged; and for a word, a tear" (198-200). It is indeed ironic that a "tear" of Dalila's should have been enough to wreck Samson's vessel. The sea imagery firmly connects her with the Philistines, worshippers of the sea-idol, and contributes to the theme of the struggle between the god of Israel and Dagon. It should be noted here that in the Book of Judges, Dalila is said to have been motivated by money (Judg. xxi, 5) rather than patriotic consideration. Milton's emphasis on the national feelings of Dalila helps to create another point of view to counter-balance the spirit of the Old Testament. Dalila even reminds Samson of the death of the Canaanite leader, Sisera, whom Jael lured to take refuge with her after his defeat by the Hebrews. Deborah's song, exulting over the death of Sisera (Jug. V), celebrates the death of an enemy. Dalila stresses that she too feels proud in defeating the enemy of her people.

While emphasizing Dalila's patriotism, Milton was quite aware that post-biblical rabbinical tradition did not place Samson at the top of its lists of heroes because of his marriage to Dalila (Stollman 1971). The rabbis of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds regarded Samson as a broker of Mosaic law in marrying a gentile. Milton was familiar with the legends of the rabbis in *Aggadic Midrash*¹² where Samson is represented as unjewish because of his relation with Dalila. As an example, I may quote one of those rabbinical legends. It reads as follows:

When Samson told Dalilah that he was a Nazarite unto God, she was certain that he had divulged the true secret of his strength. She knew his character too well to entertain the idea that he could couple the name of God with an untruth. There was a weak side to his character too. He allowed sensual pleasures to dominate him. The

¹¹ On Milton's use of marine imagery in *Samson Agonistes*, see J. J. M. Tobin (1977).

¹² *Aggadic Madrash* is a collection of rabbinical legends that reinterpret the text of the Old Testament. Harris Fletcher (1930) shows that Milton knew the Buxtorf *Rabbinical Bible* of 1618 which includes Midrashic material.

consequence was that "he who went astray after his eyes, lost his eyes." He continued to lead his old life of profligacy in prison, and he was encouraged thereto by the Philistines, who set aside all considerations of family purity in the hope of descendants who should be the equals of Samson in giant strength and stature (Kossner 1974:247).

Milton captures the spirit of the *Talmud* in making the Chorus in the play say to Samson:

Yet truth to say, I oft have heard men wonder
Why thou shouldst wed Philistian women rather
Than of thine own Tribe fairer, or as fair
At least of thy own Nation, and as noble.
(215-218)

Two views -- the Talmudic and that of Dalila as a Philistine patriot -- are juxtaposed. The clash between the two views is also treated along national/religious lines.

This conflict of views becomes particularly striking in the exchange with Harapha. Israel's god is seen as a national deity whose champion is Samson; just as Harapha is the champion of Philistia and Dagon. The giant "Harapha of Gath" came to Milton from the account of David's encounter with Goliath in I Samuel 17:

And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and the beasts of the field. Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: I come to thee in the name of the lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. And all this assembly shall know that... the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hands (I Sam. 17⁴⁰⁻⁴⁷)

In each case the champion of Israel wins and the champion of the Philistines loses. In Milton's play, Samson tells Harapha that the ultimate end is "to decide whose god is God" (1176). This test of deity, always culminating in the triumph of Israel's god, is typical of the Old Testament, and there are several passages where it occurs. "One of the most striking is the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, where Elijah taunts his opponents because of their ineffectual god" (Goldman 1974:85). Harapha's defeat symbolizes the defeat of all Philistia; a defeat determined by preconceived ideas and foregone conclusions.

This prejudiced and fanatic attitude reaches its climax in the brutal barbarism at the end of the play where the Philistines are totally destroyed by the champion of Jehovah. The mood and the general tone of the play's end is undoubtedly another Hebrew song of exultation over the death of enemies, similar to that of Deborah over the death of Sisera. Those critics and scholars who interpret Milton's play as a Christian drama, should be

reminded that Manoa's speeches at the end have no suggestion whatsoever of the Christian idea of immortality, of the resurrection of body and soul. Certainly, no Christian spirit of forgiveness is sensed by the reader.

The portrait of the Philistines in *Samson Agonistes* is framed by the Hebraic spirit of the Old Testament and rabbinical writings. The portrait is thus necessarily conditioned by that standpoint. The conflict is shown as national/religious between the champion of Jehovah and the champion of Dagon. Milton is faithful to his Hebrew sources in picturing the Philistines as gentiles whose destruction is received with jubilation. This attitude towards the Philistines stems from certain convictions that usually rely on divine sanctity for a particular perspective. There are indeed instances where Milton deviates from his sources to give a bright picture of the Philistines or simply to present a different point of view. However, the major part of the portrait is much closer to the original story of the Book of Judges. The obvious analogues to Samson are the Hebraic prophets, judges, and men of the Old Testament. Milton's placement of Samson's story in the context of Judges suggests that Samson is to be understood as one of the leaders of Israel whom God has "chosen" to defeat her enemies. The Philistines are viewed as those enemies.

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