

**New Perspectives
on Intercultural Reading
of the Bible**

Hermeneutical Explorations
in Honor of Hans de Wit

Edited by Daniel S. Schipani, Martien Brinkman, Hans Snoek

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Judging Samson

Judges 16 in Intercultural Reading and the Arts after 9/11

Klaas Spronk

Through this study on the changing views of the death of Samson, especially after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in 2001, I want to show that it is useful to combine an intercultural reading of the Bible with an analysis of modern representations of the Bible in art. As has been emphasized time and again by Hans de Wit, intercultural reading of the Bible should not be restricted to observing different interpretations of biblical texts being read in different contexts. The interaction between these readers—and this also applies to the relationship between professional and ordinary readers—should ideally result in the readers finding and accepting new perspectives for themselves. In this way, the authority of the Bible is not used only to legitimize the already existing value system or prejudices. Preferably, reading the Bible results in a transformation toward more peaceful ideas and convictions, based on a critical self-understanding. One could say that this is the goal of every exegesis of the Bible that aspires to be more than the common academic study of the origin or structure of the text. Intercultural reading of the Bible has much potential in this regard, as has become clear in projects such as that described in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (de Wit et al. 2004). Reports of the reading sessions within the project, however, also show that getting to know and learning to respect other views does not easily lead to giving up or changing one's own views. An important element in applying the texts is the extent to which the reader is able to identify her/himself with a person in the story. Sometimes one may be surprised and helpfully challenged by the differences in this respect between readers from different cultures, but usually these differences can be explained away on the basis of the differences in present-day

cultural contexts; this hardly leads to readers critiquing and transforming their own views.

A possible way to increase potential for transformation through the Bible reading process may be to include exploration of the way biblical texts and motives are represented in the arts. I maintain that, as a rule, artists are more capable of grasping something of the inspiration of the biblical writer than is the scholar who is trying to reconstruct the writing process. Art also functions as a mirror of the society in which it is produced. In this way, it may help us get a fresh look at both the biblical texts and ourselves. To illustrate this, we will now look at how the death of Samson as described in Judges 16:21–30 is rendered in modern literature and performances.

Samson: “The First Suicide Killer”

When it comes to intercultural reading of the Bible, interpreting the book of Judges is an interesting test case. Hans de Wit has highlighted big differences between Western and Latin American exegetical studies (de Wit 2001; 2004, 482–85)—not so much regarding the method, which is primarily historical-critical, but regarding Latin American exegetes being much more interested in political and economic matters than their Western colleagues are. Latin American exegetes also see direct links between the historical situation of Israel in the period of the judges and their own situation, whereas the Western approach is more focused on the author/redactor and his audience. The Latin American exegetes appear to be more conservative with regard to the authority of the Bible and methods of exegesis, whereas their Western colleagues appear to be more conservative with regard to applying the biblical texts to their own social context.

Another interesting aspect is the fact that one of the basic themes of the story of Samson is the intercultural conflict between Israel and the Philistines (Greiner 2000). Samson plays a remarkable role in this regard. He is called to act against the Philistines and defend the Israelite identity, but in his actions he repeatedly crosses the boundaries between the two cultures, especially in his affection for Philistine women. In the end, the conflict escalates into a bloodbath, and the story raises the question whether following the emotions of

love could have been a way out of the cultural conflict. Perhaps these cultures are not so extremely separate after all.

The terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, greatly impacts the way we look at the story of Samson's death. When I heard the first messages about a strange airplane accident in New York, I was on my way home from a conference of VU University Amsterdam, where I had given a colorful presentation about Samson in the history of art (see Houtman & Spronk 2004, Spronk 2014). As it became clear what was happening in New York, I was struck by the similarities between that event and the story I had presented the day before, with nice pictures and beautiful music (Spronk 2001). In both situations, the hero of the story had dealt a big blow to the enemy in a place that symbolized the power and glory of the enemy. Even the numbers in the two events corresponded with each other; the two pillars brought down in Judges 16 have their counterpart in the two collapsing buildings in New York, and the result was the same in both instances—three thousand people killed. I realized that the hero of the biblical story looked like a suicide bomber. On some Muslim websites, the attack on the Twin Towers was associated with a passage from the Qur'an speaking of fire from hell coming upon the unbelievers: "But those who deny (their Lord), for them will be cut out a garment of fire" (Surah 22:19).³ It is reported that the hijackers had been instructed to meditate on texts from the Qur'an with the promise and directive of Allah: "I will instill terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers: smite ye above their necks" (Surah 8:12). Surah 9:5 instructs Muslims to kill unbelievers, to capture them, and to ambush them. It is often suggested that this kind of harsh language in the Qur'an explains Islamic violence. Philip Jenkins, however, admonishes readers in a 2009 *Boston Globe* article not to answer the question whether harsh language in the Qur'an explains Islamic violence "till you've taken a look inside the Bible."

Although Jenkins does not refer to Samson, it has become customary to do so in this regard. A well-known example is found in the recent retelling of the story of Samson by David Grossman (2006, 143, published in Hebrew in 2005): "In the echo chamber

³ Quoted from Abdullah Yusef Ali, *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (New Delhi: Goodworld Books, 1934).

of our own time and place there is no escaping the thought that Samson was, in a sense, the first suicide killer; and although the circumstances of his deed were different from those familiar to us from the daily reality of the streets of Israel, it may be that the act itself established in human consciousness a mode of murder and revenge directed at innocent victims, which has been perfected in recent years.” Like Greiner, Grossman (2006, 96)⁴ notices that in the story of Judges 13–16, Samson is so involved with the Philistines, not only negatively but also positively, that he “often seems to the reader to be a character more ‘Philistine’ than Jewish.”

For many centuries, Samson was, in the eyes of the readers of the Bible, the strong and self-sacrificing hero, an example for the youth (Gunn 2005, 175–82, 220–27). John Milton (1671) put this notion into words in his classical poem *Samson Agonistes*, where Samson’s father Manoa praises him after his death, offering a monument in stones and words:

There will I build him
A monument, and plant it round with shade
Of Laurel ever green and branching Palm,
With all his Trophies hung, and Acts enroll’d
In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song.
Thither shall all the valiant youth resort,
And from his memory inflame their breasts
To matchless valour and adventures high:
(*Samson Agonistes* 1736–1743)

For Zionists, the stories of Samson were a source of inspiration. Associated with Samson was the image of the ideal soldier willing to sacrifice his life for the young nation of Israel. With this image, a new picture of death emerged—not the death of Jews passively massacred by powerful Germans but the death of Jews fighting until the end. Brown (2013) tells the story of the Polish village Neshvitz, where the Jewish inhabitants at the end of December 1941 founded an underground organization, adopting two slogans: “They shall not go like sheep to slaughter” and “Let me die with the Philistines” (Jgs 16:30).

⁴ See also Houtman 2007.

Already before 9/11, however, the heroism of Samson was gradually collapsing, as can be deduced from his image in modern Hebrew literature. With the growing power of the state of Israel, the story of Samson became “a powerful tool for criticizing the Israeli military hegemony” (Harris 2012, 67). This is illustrated well in the story by Amos Oz, first published in 1965, about a father—a strong member of the kibbutz, named Shimshon—and his son Gideon. The father embodies the Zionist ideal, but his son is not like him. Gideon tries to make his father proud by joining the paratroopers. But there he utterly fails and becomes so isolated that he sees no other solution than committing suicide—far from the heroic death with which the name of his father is associated.

In Muslim literature, a similar development of Samson’s heroic stature fading can be observed (Rippin 2008). Initially, although Samson is not mentioned by name in the Qur’an, medieval authors incorporated him into the Qur’anic prophetic world under the name Shamsun. Samson also found a place in Muslim art and in popular stories. Since 9/11, however, Muslims have tended to point out with pride that Samson is not found in the Islamic holy scriptures (246).

A Modern Perspective on Old Representations of Samson in the Arts

Over the course of time, Samson has been pictured and described in many ways, usually favorable. We already noted the work of Milton, in which the English poet seemed to have no problems at all with the violent vengeance of the story. This lack of discomfort has caused growing unease among modern commentators. The literary critic John Carey, in his 1968 introduction to Milton’s poem, called the description of Samson’s destruction of the temple of Dagon “morally disgusting” (335). In an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* of September 2002, Carey goes one step further. His contribution is titled “A Work in Praise of Terrorism? September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*.” According to Carey, the events in New York have changed the way we should look at this classic poem. We cannot look at it anymore as we did before; instead, we must realize that Milton’s Samson acted like a modern suicide bomber. This declaration aroused a big and long-lasting discussion among literary critics (see the surveys by Forsyth 2005 and Gregory 2010).

Some were happy with Carey's critical remarks, while others blamed him for shortsightedness in not recognizing that Milton's words left room for a more peaceful interpretation. In an interesting contribution to this debate, Ryan Netzley (2006, 528) emphasizes the role and responsibility of the reader: "*Samson Agonistes* asks for a reading practice that does not jump all too quickly off the page, to the real and really important world of history, politics, or psychology. The radicalism of Milton's dramatic poem consists in its insistence that reading is the source of political action and change." This brings him to a conclusion diametrically opposed to what Carey wrote about the influence of 9/11 on the interpretation of Milton's work: "In the end, *Samson Agonistes* shows us that events never change the way we read. Rather, only reading does" (528).

Another interesting example of a classical work's reinterpretation of Samson in the vein of 9/11 is Simon Capet's version of Handel's oratorio written in 1741 and performed in Victoria, British Columbia, in 2007 (Glavin 2007). Capet moved the story to 1946 Palestine when Zionists were battling the British. The Philistine guards of Samson wear British uniforms. In the final scene, Samson's mother takes the shirt from his body, unclasps her own coat, and retrieves a concealed explosives belt that she then girdles around Samson. After Samson has been led away, a loud explosion is heard offstage. In this way, Samson's pulling down the temple is changed into the bombing of the King David Hotel that actually took place in 1946. Through this staging, Capet wanted to get a discussion going. In an interview, he explained his motives, referring to the fact that he grew up in IRA-era Britain and lost acquaintances on the plane that was bombed over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. He said he was struck by the pervasiveness of these violent acts throughout history. He wanted to update the oratorio to make it more relevant to modern audiences by drawing parallels with the ongoing conflict in the Middle East: "Samson could be any freedom fighter." Although most reactions were negative, Capet certainly succeeded in getting people to talk about the oratorio. Many called him naive in thinking that he could rationalize the savagery of suicide bombers.

Something similar happened two years later in a modern staging of Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* (first performed in 1877), directed by Israeli Omri Nitzan and Palestinian Amir Nizar Zuab, and performed by the Flanders Opera in Antwerp. In this version, the

Hebrews are turned into Palestinians, and the Philistines into Israelis. Samson becomes a suicide bomber. He is offered a dynamite-loaded vest by a Palestinian child. In a previous scene, the same child was shot by Israeli soldiers. The first performance met with harsh criticism (Kimmelman 2009), but the production turned out to be successful, and the later video recording was well received in the *Opera News Magazine* (August 2011). According to Nitzan, the biblical story provides a useful lens through which today's problems can be seen more clearly. What becomes clear in the reactions to a March 16, 2011, video clip of the opera posted on YouTube⁵ is that it did not change the minds of the people involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It only aroused them.

Intercultural Reading of the Story of Samson's Death

In his voluminous commentary (almost 900 pages) on the book of Judges, Walter Groß (2009, 744–45) discusses a number of examples from the history of interpretation of Judges 16 given above. He remarks that every literary text once it is published has its own life, independent from the author. In a new context it can acquire new meanings. Especially when it comes to the application of biblical texts about violence, this can cause big problems. In his opinion, it is necessary to describe the original meaning of such texts as precisely as possible in order to leave room for views that may be different or even offensive to modern readers.⁶ Intercultural reading of the Bible is based exactly on this idea of the meaning potential of the authoritative texts. Groß rightly points to the risk that the texts might be

⁵ See "Samson et Dalila—Vlaamse Operal" at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkQyHCmiTLY>.

⁶ "Sobald ein Autor eine eindruckliche, anschauliche und emotional berührende Szene literarisch gestaltet hat, ist sie unabhängig von seinen Intentionen und weitgehend auch unabhängig von dem Kontext, in dem er sie gestaltet hat; sie verselbständigt sich und entfaltet, in neue Kontexte gestellt und unter abweichenden Vorverständnissen wahrgenommen und erst recht in den Worten eines bedeutenden Schriftstellers unkalkulierbar neue Sinnpotentiale. Dieser Umstand bereitet zunehmend größte Probleme im Umgang mit biblischen Texten gewalttätigen Inhalts. Eine möglichst präzise Erfassung ihres ursprünglich intendierten Sinnes mag dazu helfen, daß man sie auch heute noch vernehmen kann. Freilich muß dieser Versuch auch unternommen werden, wenn er einen biblischen Text in seiner Andersartigkeit eher verfremdet als nahebringt" (744–45).

applied in any possible way and thus easily used to confirm only one's own views. He also sees it as the task of the professional reader to safeguard the *Andersartigkeit* (otherness) of the biblical texts, because only the exegetical expert will be able to grasp their original meaning. His own work, however, already indicates that this is more problematic than he suggests. He presents a very detailed reconstruction of the way the Hebrew text reached its present form, but this will certainly not convince every other scholar in this field. There is much disagreement about the historical reality that the texts describe as well as about the time and situation of the original authors. When it comes to textual application, one has to decide on a starting point. Is it the situation of the story itself? Or should we take into account that the book of Judges can be read as an introduction to the stories of the kings? In the latter case, there is more room for a critical view of judges such as Samson. His story functions like a mirror for the kings following him. In fighting the Philistines, he looks like the first kings—Saul and David. Blinded at the end of his life, he reminds us of the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, who met the same fate. In light of this negative ending, the story of Samson can also be read as the historical account of a failure. If, on the other hand, the story of Samson is taken by itself, it can be interpreted more positively as the history of a hero who may have had problems in his relations with his God and with women but who, in the end—despite the women and with the help of his God—succeeded to fulfill his task.

An important aspect of the noble cause formulated by Groß—to accept as much as possible the *Andersartigkeit* of the biblical text—is the reader's self-critical look at the way he/she reads and applies the text. Groß may be too optimistic about Western exegetes being able to take the objective point of view necessary to come as close as possible to the original meaning. Already, the fact that he is looking for something like the original meaning, and the suggestion that it is possible to formulate this in a pure scholarly way, can be seen as a one-sided view of reality. It might say more about the researcher than about the object of his research. It is at least something that should be questioned. In this respect, intercultural reading can be of help.

The story of Samson is an interesting test case because in itself it is a story not only about conflicting cultures but also about finding one's identity within this conflict. At first glance, it seems

clear who is good (Samson and the Israelites) and who is bad (the Philistines). A closer look, however, reveals that this distinction is not always so obvious. Samson is betrayed not only by Philistines but also by Israelites—when they decide to hand over their judge to the enemy. Samson himself proves to be far from perfect, and he appears to have more sympathy for the Philistines than is good for someone appointed to fight them. This makes the application of the story a complicated endeavor. It also asks the reader and interpreter to have a clear view of his/her own situation and what is expected of the reading. A good explanation of the text will go hand in hand with a good explanation of the position of the reader. The story of the death of Samson is a story both about victims and people using violence and about reversing these roles. This makes it difficult for the reader to identify himself with one of the characters of the story. This is a strength of the story—in calling us not to give in to the temptation to make easy judgments about who is good or bad and simply condemning the use of violence. It is useful to feel uneasy about these things because this discomfort can help us look more openly and realistically at our own situation and the roles(s) we are playing ourselves.

In the reading reports of the project, recorded in *Through the Eyes of Another* (de Wit et al. 2004), one notes that reading groups are often surprised by the choices made in other groups when it comes to identifying with characters in the biblical stories. Usually this can be explained by the different context of the readers. It is often left at that; the differences are politely noted and accepted. It would be good to go one step further, however, and experiment with the other interpretation(s). If transformation of ideas and convictions is to happen, perhaps it is possible or even necessary to break open traditional views. That breaking open may feel uncomfortable—akin to the descriptions of what resulted from new views on Milton and from modern performances of the classical pieces by Handel and Saint-Saëns. Of course, this way of reading the Bible cannot be applied to all texts. Much depends on the nature of the specific text involved. Some texts are meant to comfort, while others—like the story of Samson—are probably best understood when we allow them to take us out of our comfort zone. To achieve this openness to discomfort, readers of the Bible—both professional and ordinary readers—can be helped by looking through the eyes of artists.

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