

virgin with child, asserting that 'interference' in herself. There is a demythicisation which is in principle legitimate and certainly fashionable. The Church has not defined the limits to which it may go, but Mary is there as the fortified place past which it must not. She remains the guardian of the historical Christ.

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SOME NOTES ON THE SAGA OF SAMSON AND THE HEROIC MILIEU

The acute reader of the Sacred Scriptures can recognise without any great effort the heroic style when he meets it even if, as is usually the case, he does not pause to analyse it. There is a greater tightness, economy and tension about the writing; he feels a quicker pulse beating, a more instant march of the narrative. This 'large utterance' has, too, its great moments and is built around them: the paradox of the death and triumph of Samson at the feast of Dagan, the lad David holding up the head of the Philistine giant, the night march across the Jordan of the men of Jabesh with the mutilated body of Saul, the funeral pyre burning in the night. We can say that the heroic narrative is, by definition, that which captures and puts on record the great moment.

The great moment is made possible in the first place and, in a way, conventionalised by what contemporary society approves or disapproves—it depends, that is, on the organisation of society and the current values which make it what it is. With the age with which we are dealing—that of the great race migrations about 1200 B.C. and after—society is geared to war. It is the age in which Ugarit and Karkemish, Hattush and Troy were gutted in the track of the invading hordes from the north; it is also the age which sees the tribes of Israel fighting their way up into the cultivated land-belt for their place in the sun. The stresses and strains of that age provided experience which left an indelible impression on the memory of those who took part in it, an impression which, in the course of time, takes body in the storytelling which went to make the Iliad and the epic of the Philistine wars. This reminds us that the divisions which we introduce into our literary and historical studies of that age—Biblical, Semitic, 'classical,' pre-Homeric, etc.—can lead us to misrepresent the real state of the question. Communications between the Aegean and the Syrian coast, between Cyprus and Ugarit, between Egypt and Crete were not

difficult and the whole of the Levant had much in common culturally. The contacts, in particular, between Homer and the Greek epic on one side and the remains of literatures in the N.W. Semitic group on the other (including those found in the Old Testament) have been noted by scholars for some time past. The historical circumstances of the great race movements of the time, the steady trekking down from the Balkans into the Aegean, from the mainland down to Crete and Egypt, the settlement of large groups of alien blood on the Syrian coasts—besides the Philistines we know of an enclave at Dor from the Egyptian travel log of Wen Amon¹ and another in the Gaza strip from the Old Testament—brought these racially diverse peoples into frequent contact and conflict.

There are likenesses, too, in the organisation of society. The twelve tribes gathered round the sanctuary of Siloe, committed to the defence of their palladium, the Ark of the Alliance, are not essentially different from the amphictyony of Delphi and remind one of the central importance of the temples of Apollo and Demeter in the social life of the associates. There is in both cases the convocation of the tribesmen at fixed times, the imposition of certain fixed duties such as the sacred war² and public liturgy. In both cases, too, the whole of society and the basic assumptions which determine its shape exist in function of war and the waging of war. The able-bodied men are of course the fighters, the lame are craftsmen of some kind—usually smiths³—and the blind man is the minstrel-poet.⁴ We might remark here on the surpassing honour in which the bard is held in this society. All will remember the royal treatment shown in the *Odyssey*⁵ to the minstrel in the house of Alcimous and the respect which is enjoined for Phemios when Penelope burst into tears at his sad notes—a respect which is found in equal measure among the neighbouring Semites.⁶

The subject matter of the heroic literature written to describe and recall the *gesta* of that age when it was beginning to pass away is also, as we might expect, generally uniform: war, battle, razzia and skirmish. Personal combat of the great figures caught the eye and the

¹ cf. J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 25–9

² The *herem* of the Hebrews. A good example in Jg. 20–1 where Benjamin is almost (but not quite) exterminated (see especially 21:15 and 17). cf. the war of the Delphic League against Crisa in the sixth century to free the shrine from sacrilege.

³ The blacksmith-magician who is halt or a dwarf is not uncommon in mythologies.

⁴ Why else did popular tradition represent the patronymic Homer as blind—the blind poet of craggy Chios? Samson, too, when he is blinded, is set to play the harp. The blind harper from the Tomb of Patenemheb is now familiar to many from the jacket of Father Grollenberg's Atlas.

⁵ *Odyssey*, Bk. I and XIII *passim*

⁶ The Arab court-poet Mutanabbi, in a much later age, once received 1,000 golden denarii for a piece that he threw off in honour of a maecenas at the court of Egypt!

imagination—Hector and Achilles, David and Goliath, or of one hero against great odds—Achilles again, driving back the throng at the Scaean Gates, Odysseus and the suitors, Samson and the thousand at Ramath Lehi. There is also plenty of sport and horse-play, feasting and wining and not a little bawdy. With all these go the amorous adventures of the hero; indeed, they often play a decisive part. The sorrows of Troy begin with Helen and those of the Achaeans with Briseis; the whole story of Samson is organised around his relations with the girl from Timnah and the girl from Gaza and finally and fatally Delilah from the valley of Soreq.

It will be easy to deduce from all this that these stories in their original form were by no means religious in character. They go back no doubt to bardic recitations either at the feast—Homer tells us that without music and dancing no banquet is complete¹—or at the religious festival as in the case of the Philistines in the Temple of Dagan.² They are essentially secular literature and their purpose was to entertain. The religious sense of the episodes of the Samson saga is discoverable not in the episodes themselves but in the context in which they were placed by the inspired editor. We see in examining Jg. 13–16 that these chapters clearly bear the signs of this editing and that no great ingenuity is required to individuate them.

A Reading of Judges 14–16

Bearing in mind, then, the world and the situation in life out of which the Samson cycle grew, we propose to re-read a part of that cycle in an effort to gain some insight into the way the facts were handled by the 'maker' and how the narrative, as we have it, was built up. The editorial note at the beginning of Chapter 13 gives us the context into which the stories were fitted—a balanced series of episodes centred round the heroes of pre-monarchic days retold to point a lesson to the reader—or hearer—of a later age.³ It is a later age, too, which has added a circumstantial account of an annunciation made by an angel to his parents, though the theme of his special dedication to Yahweh by the *nazir* vow plays, as we shall see, an important part in his undoing. The Samson Saga, properly so-called, begins with the hero's first 'going down' in search of a wife, to Timnah.⁴

¹ *Odyssey*, Bk. I. Phemius is playing to the suitors.

² Jg. 16:23f. Here, as elsewhere, feast and cultic act are not always clearly distinguished. Even at a non-cultic feast the song could have a religious subject, as with the 'youth with a beautiful voice' in the ugaritic Ba'al and 'Anat cycle who sang, during the feast, of 'Ba'al in the heights of Saphōn' (*Anat*, I, 20).

³ It recurs through the Book of Judges. The formula is complete in 3:7–11.

⁴ Jg. 14:1

A purely material analysis of the narrative of these three chapters and the division of the episodes work out something like this :

- 1 The Girl from Timnah (ch. 14 and 15)
 - (a) episode of the lion and riddle (ch. 14)
 - (b) episode of the foxes and the ass's jawbone (ch. 15)
- 2 The Girl from Gaza (ch. 16:1-3)

—episode of the city gate-posts
- 3 The Girl from the Valley of Soreq (Delilah) (ch. : 16, 4-31)
 - (a) first temptation : 7 fresh bowstrings
 - (b) second temptation : 7 new ropes
 - (c) third temptation : 7 locks of hair—and his undoing—
leading to
 - (d) death and triumph in the Temple of Dagan (vv. 23-31)

Over against this static analysis of the narrative, however, we must place the dynamic key-idea which makes the plot and unites the different parts into a dramatic whole. It seems that the same technique is adopted as in the drama of Abimelek—the Macbeth of the Old Testament—who is dogged by the effects of an initial evil act and upon whom comes, through the apparently fortuitous play of circumstance, the force of the curse of Yotham.¹ Samson is a vowed *nazir* from the moment of his conception to the day of his death, under obligation never to drink strong drink, never to have his hair shaven, never to have contact with a dead body or anything which has touched a dead body.² The first violation comes after his visit to the girl from Timnah—he eats honey from the lion's carcass. Thence the riddle, the surrender to the woman's cajolery, the killing of the thirty at Ashkelon, the burning of the harvest, and the rest. The second comes in the feast which he made for the marriage, and this leads straight on to the fatal riddle. Oral recitation would have brought out the particular interest of this fact by the clever play on the sibilants : *wayyá'as shám Shimshón mishtéh*—'and Samson made there a feast.'³ The third violation of the vow and, climactically, the most fatal was the revealing of his dedication and the subsequent loss of his hair, which leads to his death. Thus the two motifs of the broken vow and the strong man helpless before the wiles of woman have been used with compelling effect to make a single dramatic whole of the stories which came to be told and the songs which came to be sung around

¹ Jg. 9. The curse is a religious act, irrevocable once pronounced, which sets in motion the forces of retribution.

² Num. 6:1-8

³ The words for 'feast' and 'drinking' in Hebrew are identical.

the person and exploits of the rumbustious playboy of Zorah who saved his people.

We can go a stage further in our analysis of the narrative of these chapters and attempt to perceive below the surface of the edition which we have before us the evidence of an earlier existence, when these stories were in the mouth of the 'scop'—the minstrel of the feast. In doing this we do not intend to associate ourselves with the efforts which are occasionally made to discover a regular rhythmic pattern throughout the O.T. narrative,¹ but it remains fairly evident that traces of an earlier rhythmic arrangement and grouping of what we can call 'sound units' can here and there still be detected. It might be worth while to examine one or two cases. In the translations which follow, the words are kept as far as possible in the same order as the original, despite the rather unusual effect in the English.

14:1-3 *Samson's first 'going down'*

Samson went down to Timnah
And he saw a girl in Timnah
Of the girls Philistine

And he went up and told his father²
A girl I saw in Timnah
Of the girls Philistine

Now
Get her
For me as a wife

We notice stylistic elements which are found abundantly elsewhere in the Old Testament; grouping in units of three; the placing of the proper name in the emphatic position—at the end; the exploitation of grammatical suffixes for rhyming effect and assonance. Omitting his father's reply and the son's reiterated demand—the former similar in form to v. 1 though rhythmically halt, the latter having a chiasmic rhyme: -a, -i; i-, -a, we have in v. 4 a redactional note showing the religious sense of the action which is beginning. Then

14:5 *Samson's second 'going down'*

Samson went down to Timnah³
And he came to the vineyards of Timnah
Lo, a lion cub roaring to meet him

¹ That, for example, of E. Sievers more than fifty years ago or the more recent version of A. Bruno (1955).

² 'and his mother' omitted with a probable Syriac reading. There is some confusion about 'father and mother' in the next few verses. 'He said' would not, of course, have a place in an oral, poetic recitation.

³ 'and his father and mother' omitted. They would have seen the killing of the lion-cub.

The following verses (6-9) do not give a clear enough picture of the original arrangement to make safe deductions, but the phrase 'he told not his father and mother' is structurally important¹ and the key-word 'honey,' vital for the next stage of the story, twice comes last in a sequence. We do not know whether the repeated reminder of the influence of the Spirit on his deeds of renown forms part of the original oral form.

14 *Samson's third 'going down'*

Samson went down to the woman²
There made Samson a feast
For so was the wont of the youths

And it befell when the people saw him
They took him thirty companions
To stay beside him

And then comes the riddle. The *mashal*—a short, pithy and pointed saying—was very dear to the heart of the Semite who loved the mysterious and oracular. There are several examples in the story of Samson, all showing the great delight that was taken in verbal jugglery of this kind. In this case we have the immediate *Sitz im Leben* of the *mashal*—a battle of wits provoked by the good things of a marriage feast, taking the form of a riddle (*hidah*) to which a rhymed answer was expected.³ Hard upon the riddle and the bet follows the yielding to his wife's entreaties on the seventh day of the feast⁴ and the killing of the thirty; and the fate which will catch up with him at the end is well into its stride.

These few observations from Chapter 14 are only a sampling of the kind of analysis which, though not without its dangers and pitfalls, yet can teach us something about the historical narrative in the Old Testament. It presents us with a whole series of problems in literary history, the answers to which are as yet by no means clear. How many different recensions of the Samson story are represented in the text of the Old Testament as we have it?⁵ Did these stories first take shape on the lips of the rhapsodist at the banquet or the religious feast

¹ Was the killing of the lion also against the vow?

² TM has 'his father' as going down, but this is surely wrong since he could hardly qualify as a 'youth'—*baḥūr*.

³ Both riddle and answer play heavily upon words beginning with the same sound: *ma-* or *me-* (four out of six in the riddle, five out of six in the answer).

⁴ Ignoring the inconsistency of her faked tears for *seven* days when she was co-opted only on the *fourth* day!

⁵ The concluding formula 'he judged Israel twenty years' occurs at the end of both Chapters 15 and 16. This seems to point to two distinct recensions.

as is the case of the Homeric stories? Were they recited at given times at the great tribal centres such as Siloe, as the Greek rhapsodists recited competitively for the Panathenaea? Were they then collected by the priests and formed into a context of religious history and modified according to the needs of a 'theological pragmatism'¹ imposed upon them? To many of these questions it is very doubtful if we shall ever have a certain answer; but there can be at the same time a kind of conspiracy of probabilities as our inquiry opens up, one after another, unsuspected depths, perspectives and dimensions in the text which we had not previously suspected.

Profane and Sacred History

What then, it might be asked, of the sacred character of the word of God? Are we really to believe that these old stories are inspired in the same way that the praise of Charity in 1 Cor. 13 or the hymn of the Divine Plan in the Epistle to the Ephesians are inspired, and that consequently they are inerrant? How did they get into the canon of Sacred Scripture in the first place and what useful purpose can they serve? Are they really meant to be edifying?

If we mean edification in the usual acceptance of the word we can hardly pretend that Samson and his companions in the Book of Judges edify. Ehud who gets a private audience with the king of Moab on the grounds that he has a religious message to give him, and then avails himself of the favourable reception granted him, to assassinate his unsuspecting enemy, striking him down in cold blood, is hardly an edifying spectacle in the sense of the word referred to. Nor is Jael, praised by the victorious tribesmen of Israel as 'most blessed of women,'² a very edifying figure as she invites the fleeing enemy into her tent, gives him to drink, puts him to bed and then, as he lies exhausted, drives a tent-peg through his temples. Nor, for that matter, does Abimelek edify, as the strong, Macchiavellian figure who exterminates his own family in order to realise his ambitions; nor Jephthah, the son of the harlot, who sacrifices his own daughter. If we are looking for edification of the kind that the second nocturn of the Breviary on the feastday of a saint provides, then we must honestly confess that the Book of Judges is not for us.

There is, however, edification of another kind to which our attention is drawn by a remark of St Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth³: 'When all this happened to them, it was a

¹ The phrase is Eissfeldt's, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 2nd ed., Tuebingen 1956, p. 309

² Jg. 5:24

³ 1 Cor. 10:11. *The Knox version*

symbol; the record of it was written as a warning to us, in whom history has reached its fulfilment.' He was referring there to certain happenings which are recorded in the Book of Exodus, but what he says applies equally to our own subject and, indeed, to the whole of the Old Testament. It has been said that the historical narrative of the Old Testament, like Janus, has two faces—one which looks back into the world of the profane and secular of the past out of which Israel came, and another which looks forward to the end of the human pilgrimage, the fulfilment of history in Christ and the Church.¹ This means that at any point at which we choose to consider the events recorded in the Old Testament we will discover this tension between the profane and the sacred and how the stuff of human history—the history of the 'visible, vehement earth'—passes over into sacred history, the history of redemption, the history which has its distant term in Christ.

This is especially true of the immediate context in which we find the Saga of Samson incorporated. The events related are sacred history—the 'goings down' and the goings on of Samson included—not because they provide ethical norms of conduct immediately applicable to our private lives—which they obviously do not—but because they have been selected by an inspired editor or redactor as apt to demonstrate the sense and the direction of human events; that the actions of the various protagonists who pass across the stage are known of God and directed by Him to ends not always discernible to the spectator in time and space; that human history, in short, has meaning because it is meant by Someone.

It is the same context which uses these old stories to get across another point of capital importance, so important that it forms the theme of all the historical writings of the Old Testament: 'the soul that sins shall die.'² This is the whole point, to take one example, behind the historical *midrash* of the author of *Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah* who sees the destruction of the kingdom as the logical outcome of the primordial apostasy of the protoparents repeated *ad infinitum*; it is crystal clear in the form which the author of *Judges* has given to the Samson stories in which the breach of the vow leads to sin and, through sin, death.

It is only when we read the Samson Saga in the human situation in which it came into existence that we can hope to get anything like a clear idea of how, and at what point, and for what purposes God has touched our human affairs and given them meaning. In this sense

¹ W. Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, Part I, p. 1

² Ez. 18:4. cf. Rom. 5:12 and the whole of the subsequent development of the 'Sin-Death' theology of St Paul.