ADAPTATION OF THE SAMSON NARRATIVE IN THE SIMPSONS

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Abstract

Samson, the Nazarite Judge of the Judahites, is a character who has been widely discussed among biblical scholars. Scholars’ conclusions range from Samson as a hero, to Samson as a moral lesson, from Samson as a tragic character, to Samson as a literary device. There is no one view of Samson that is overwhelmingly more popular among scholars. However, scholars are not the only ones who have taken it upon themselves to interpret and bring forth a message or meaning from the Samson narrative. The creators of The Simpsons have also taken their own spin on the story in an episode cleverly titled “Simpson and Delilah.” In this paper I analyze the use of the biblical story of Samson in The Simpsons and ultimately compare the message conveyed in the episode to those found in the biblical story by scholars.

The book of Judges in the Bible tells of the tragic and turbulent history of the Israelites, who cycle between times of great sin and times of repentance during which they seek God. In the midst of this extended period, God appoints various judges over the people as a method of keeping the Israelites from falling into sin, which does not end up working very well throughout the book. It is in this book that we find the story of Samson, the Nazarite judge over the Israelites. In keeping with the overarching theme and tone of the book of Judges, Samson’s story is equally as turbulent and often controversial. It has been used in church sermons to teach church-goers about the importance of relying on God rather than personal ability, or to teach about the dangers of intermarriage with non-believers. References to Samson can even be seen

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1 Judges 3:7-12, 15; 4:1-5, 24; 6:1-14; 8:33-34; 10
outside of the church setting in songs such as “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen and “Samson and Delilah” by the Grateful Dead. It can also be seen in television shows such as The Simpsons. Samson is so enigmatic that many scholars have carried out in-depth analyses seeking to understand both his importance in the Bible and the message being portrayed through his narrative. While they have come to a variety of conclusions about the author’s intentions in describing or creating this character, the creators of The Simpsons have integrated the story into one of their episodes to tell a slightly different message than what can be interpreted from the Bible.

The birth of Samson is announced in after the author reveals that the Israelites are being oppressed by the Philistines as punishment for their evil deeds. The chapter goes on to tell the reader how an angel declares to a barren woman that she will give birth to a boy who shall be a “Nazarite, dedicated to God from the womb.”2 A list of regulations surrounding the Nazarite vow can be found in the book of Numbers, shedding light on what exactly it meant for Samson to take on this vow from birth. A Nazarite was to be dedicated to the Lord, he was not permitted to cut his hair at all during the time of his vow, to come into contact with any corpses, or to consume any grape product or fermented beverage.3 In the case of Samson, he was supposed to remain under this vow for the entirety of his life.4 What happens, however, does not coincide with what would be associated with one under the Nazarite vow. First, Samson seeks a wife from among the Philistines and kills a lion on the way to see the woman. He later eats honey from the carcass and gives some to his parents, but does not cleanse himself according to the protocol from Numbers. During his wedding party, Samson consumes wine and later kills several Philistine

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2 Judges 13:1, 5
3 Numbers 6:1-8
4 Judges 5:6
men in order to use their clothes to pay off a debt from a lost bet. After the Philistines retaliate, Samson gets even more upset, burns their crops, and later goes on another murdering spree before retiring himself to a cave. The Philistines respond to Samson’s murders by encamping around the Israelites to draw him out of hiding. The Israelites do not hesitate to give Samson up to the Philistines, but he is able to escape and kill a thousand more Philistines when the Spirit of the Lord comes over him.\(^5\)

Later, Samson falls in love with Delilah, another foreign woman. The leaders of the Philistines, knowing of Samson’s infatuation with Delilah, bribe her with silver to discover the source of Samson’s strength. Delilah tries three times to ask Samson what the source of his strength is, and she calls on the Philistines to capture him each time only to find that he had lied each time. After the third time, she questions his love for her and bothers him day and night about the matter until he finally tells her the truth—that the source of his strength was his uncut hair. Delilah then puts him to sleep, has his hair cut off, and calls upon the Philistines once again to capture Samson. Samson believes he can still escape despite having his hair cut; however, he cannot overpower his attackers this time because God is no longer with him. The Philistines gouge out his eyes, imprison him, and bring him before a crowd for entertainment. In one final act of revenge against the Philistines, Samson is able to gather enough strength to knock down the temple, which all of the rulers are in, thereby killing everyone including himself.\(^6\)

It is fairly reasonable to conclude that Samson is a troubled character from start to finish, despite his Nazarite vow. The creators of *The Simpsons* adopt the troubled aspect of the main character in their episode titled “Simpson and Delilah,” but take a less brutal approach than what

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\(^5\) Judges 14:2-19, 15:5-14, Numbers 6:6-12, Peterson, "Samson: Hero or Villain?", 32

\(^6\) Judges 16:1-30
we read about in the Bible. The episode begins with Homer Simpson and his family watching a trivia show on television before a commercial for “Dimoxinil, the new miracle breakthrough in hair regrowth” comes on. Homer reacts with excitement and longing, immediately tossing his “cheepo” hair growth products and rushing to the pharmacy only to find that he cannot afford the $1000 product. In the next scene, Homer tells his co-workers about his experience and complains about the meager portion of tartar sauce for their fish sticks. When one of his co-workers suggests that he should fill out some insurance forms “creatively” to make the company pay for the product, Homer concedes and returns to the pharmacist who explains that “no health insurance in the state covers something as frivolous as Dimoxinil.” Even so, the pharmacist arranges to meet Homer alone in an alley to make the exchange. Homer goes home, happily applies the product to his scalp, and says a quick prayer before going to bed. In the morning, Homer awakes to the pleasant surprise of a head full of long hair. Homer’s boosted confidence improves his and Marge’s sex life, but more importantly, it improves his work life. Everyone notices a change in him, and Mr. Burns confuses him for a young new employee worthy of a promotion. As a Junior Executive, Homer struggles with women flirting with him during interviews, until a mysterious man named Karl shows up. Though the other executives do not believe in Homer’s abilities, Karl acknowledges the fact that Homer was never meant to be an executive but takes it upon himself to help Homer become the best he can be, convincing him that he is “nature’s greatest miracle.”

During an executive meeting about the low productivity and high accident rates among the workers, Mr. Burns asks Homer for his input. Homer takes the opportunity to mention the insufficient serving of tartar sauce for their fishsticks. Smithers tries to shut him down, but
Homer’s proposition for more tartar sauce gets implemented nonetheless. Productivity seems to increase and accidents decrease, though Smithers points out that the change in numbers coincides with the fact that Simpson is no longer causing accidents nor affecting productivity. Still, Mr. Burns believes in the new Homer and gives him access to the coveted Executive Washroom. Smithers begins to get upset about Mr. Burns’ newfound preference for Homer and finds evidence of the insurance fraud in order to incriminate him.

Homer seems to be on top of the world when he is asked to give a speech to the executives, but Smithers nearly gets him fired seconds later by revealing his $1,000 insurance fraud. Luckily, Karl takes responsibility and loses his own job, leaving Homer on his own and unable to come up with a speech. Panicking, Homer gets home that evening to find Bart spilling the remainder of the Dimoxinil. He attacks Bart in his rage, but Bart gets free by saying “I love you, dad.” The next morning, Homer has lost all of his hair and all hope. Yet, Karl has somehow come through one last time to provide him with a speech. Without his hair, Homer lacks the confidence to give the speech, but Karl passionately reminds him that it was Simpson himself who accomplished everything, not the hair. “You did it! Because you believed you could and you still can!” With renewed vitality, Simpson presents his speech but is no longer recognized as the rising young executive. Despite his elaborate speech, the onlookers are critical of Homer and leave Homer sputtering and dejected. He goes home after being demoted but struggles to sleep, tormented by his downfall. He thinks Marge will no longer love him without his hair, but she comforts him affectionately as he rests on her chest.  

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7 Moore, Simpsons, “Simpson and Delilah”
While one may think that *The Simpsons* and the Bible are completely unrelated, it is not too difficult to identify the use of the Samson narrative as the foundation for “Simpson and Delilah”, as the title itself makes evident. Taking a look at several scholarly interpretations of the Samson narrative can help to even further identify how “Simpson and Delilah” uses aspects of the Samson narrative to create an entirely different message.

Some scholars hold to the common perception that Samson was a negative character, others defend him as a hero, and there are others still who have argued for a multifaceted view of the character. Biblical scholar, Cheryl Exum, has developed a detailed article titled “The Many Faces of Samson” explaining the various versions of Samson that she sees in the story and has provided convincing support for each argument. She believes Samson can be a fool, a moral lesson, a hero, a freedom fighter, a terrorist, a xenophiliac, a comic figure, a tragic figure, a trickster, a representation of Israel, and lastly-as she argues, most questionably- a judge and a Nazarite. In her article, she defines in detail the ways in which Samson fits into each of these roles. Exum sees Samson as a “fool for love,” a man who reveals his secrets to prove his love in spite of the negative consequences he must know would come from it. Samson can be a moral lesson directed at Israeliite men to warn them against “the danger of the ‘strange’ or ‘foreign’ woman,” who is characterized “as disreputable and treacherous.” The story can even be categorized as a comic, as Exum explains:

The comic is… able to acknowledge a tragic perspective and yet refuse it. It accepts, without illusion and without despair, the imperfections of the human condition… features of the comic or classic vision in the Samson saga include a fondness for riddles, word

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8 Exum, “Many Faces of Samson”, 27-29  
9 Exum, “Many Faces of Samson”, 14  
10 Exum, “Many Faces of Samson”, 15
plays and ironic punning; repetition going nowhere, as in Samson’s recurrent skirmishes with the Philistines and his repeated displays of weakness for women; and ridicule and (often cruel) laughter.” Like other comic heroes, Samson displays a remarkable absence of character development. He does not learn from his mistakes, nor is he explicitly held morally accountable for them. He betrays no sense of his mission to begin Israel’s deliverance… His wit and prowess provide the occasion to ridicule the Philistines and have a good laugh at their expense.11

Biblical professor, Elie Assis, proposes a slightly different perspective on Samson in an article titled “The Structure and Meaning of the Samson Narrative.” He begins his article by presenting the popular belief that “Samson wastes the powers bestowed upon him by God, and he does not live up to the expectations of him as a Nazarite. He is the perfect example of what a charismatic leader should not be.”12 Afterwards, Assis spends the majority of his essay explaining why this is not exactly correct, considering that despite Samson’s flaws, he was still triumphant against his enemies in his final act of life. Assis explains that “[w]hile this characterizes the story as a tragedy, at the same time it portrays Samson as a hero, and can in no way be the ending to a story that is meant to portray a disappointing, failed judge.”13 Assis instead argues that the overarching point of the story is a completely different one, namely that “The contrast between Samson’s weakness for the woman and his physical strength is the crux of the story.”14 By way of summary, “Samson’s acts of strength are triggered by his weakness for women… [Every scene in] the story opens with sexual weakness and ends with physical

11 Exum, “Many Faces of Samson”, 20-22
12 Assis, “Structure and Meaning”, 1
13 Assis, “Structure and Meaning”, 2
14 Assis, “Structure and Meaning”, 6
strength.”15 The reason the author of the story may have constructed it in this way, Assis argues, is to “indicate that God chooses the weakest of all human beings and bestows upon him the most miraculous strength. This illustrates very clearly that all strength is from God, and even a weak and poor human being may turn out to be a biblical superman if it is God’s will.” Thus, “the Samson story comes to assert the dependence of all men on God Almighty.”16

Mahri S. Leonard-Fleckman, professor of theology and Doctor of Judaic studies with a focus on the Hebrew Bible, seconds this thought in her own article, “Samson and our Reactions to the Strongman.” Her stance is that the story is meant to teach the reader “not to make the strongman our god”, because “ultimately God is the source of Samson’s strength,” and “we cannot make him our idol by focusing undue attention on him.”17 In addition to this, she notes that Samson is “a story of resistance, a story of ‘hope and vindication’ for the underdog (Israel) and a reflection of the problems with relations between Israelites and non-Israelites.”18 She even proposes that the Samson narrative is strategically placed “to bridge the end of Judges into 1 Samuel by mirroring the story of Hannah and her miraculous pregnancy in 1 Samuel 1.”19 Brian Neil Peterson, a professor of the Old Testament, takes a similar approach to his analysis of the Samson narrative, connecting it to kings Saul and David from the book of Samuel. He essentially argues that chapters 13-15 of Judges mirror the life of King David and that Samson is therefore meant to be seen in a positive light until chapter 16. Chapter 16 then shifts and reflects many aspects of King Saul’s life, including the “downward spiral and poor choices”20 that plague both

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15 Ibid
16 Assis, “Structure and Meaning”, 11
17 Leonard-Fleckman, “Reactions to the Strongman”, 223
18 Leonard-Fleckman, “Reactions to the Strongman”, 221-222
19 Leonard-Fleckman, “Reactions to the Strongman”, 219
20 Peterson, “Samson, Hero or Villain?”, 42
lives. Peterson uses this as the basis for his argument for justifying Samson’s actions in the first chapters of his narrative in light of how God’s role is indicated throughout and in light of Samson’s resemblance to David and other key successful figures of the Bible.\textsuperscript{21}

There are many ways that one could interpret Samson’s narrative; so how do the Simpsons approach adapting this widely discussed story into a cartoon? Starting with the fundamental question about whether the central character is a “good” or a “bad” character, we can see that in the case of Homer Simpson, he is generally portrayed as a good guy. Homer is a regular, well intentioned guy who-without asking for it-finds his success after miraculously growing hair. Apart from the appearance of capability given to him by his hair, Homer is portrayed as someone who truly has no innate abilities of his own but who relies on the help of a mysterious co-worker. Yet, he is also a thief who, at the end of the day, has to find comfort in the arms of his wife. One can see how these character traits reflect those of Samson. Neither Homer nor Samson has any strength of his own, and both are only able to accomplish what could be considered great feats through the assistance of a mysterious figure (Karl or God) whose motivations are unclear. Furthermore, neither character chooses his position of authority or success. Samson was born into his role, and all Homer wanted was hair, not a promotion or the responsibilities that came with it. Of course, there is the obvious motif of long hair that connects both stories, but there is also the more subtle inclusion of the flirtatious women at work which reflect the role of the tempting and deceptive women in the Samson narrative. However while Homer rejects the women, Samson allows them to lead him to his demise. Therefore one can see

\textsuperscript{21} Peterson, “Samson, Hero or Villain?”, 25-34, 38-41
how despite the previously listed similarities, the fundamental nature of the central character is much less questionable in “Simpson and Delilah” as compared to Samson.

One can conclude that Karl’s role in “Simpson and Delilah” is analogous to God’s role in Judges 13-16. He comes into the story mysteriously in Homer’s moments of need, he has to leave Homer when the latter’s source of success is discovered by his nemesis, and he ultimately comes back to help Homer in his final act as an executive. All of these events clearly mimic the role God has in the events of Samson’s life.\(^{22}\) In addition, Smithers takes on the role of the Philistines. When Homer receives recognition in the workplace, Smithers develops a vendetta against him and attempts to bring about his downfall by seeking the source of his strength- i.e. the fraudulent insurance forms. In the Bible, this is where Delilah comes in and is bribed by the Philistines,\(^{23}\) but The Simpsons does not make the same choice. Instead, the events happen one after the other but in isolation from one another. Smithers reveals the source of Simpson’s success, Karl has to leave Homer’s side, and Bart spills the hair growth serum. Bart turns out to be Homer’s Delilah, rendering Homer weak by spilling the serum and avoiding Homer’s wrath by saying “I love you.” This is similar to the way Delilah questions Samson’s love in order to get away with prying about the source of his strength in Judges 16:15-17. Though the equivalent events from Judges happen in a different order, it is nonetheless evident that the creators of The Simpsons purposely intended to mirror them. After Homer is rendered weak, he is unable to maintain his position of success even with the help of Karl, recalling Samson’s inability to defeat the Philistines after losing his hair in Judges 16:19-21. Both characters are ridiculed in front of his enemies before his ultimate demise-Samson dies, and Homer gets demoted. By contrast to

\(^{22}\) Judges 14:5-6, 19; 15:19; 16:19-20, 28-30

\(^{23}\) Judges 16:5
Samson’s tragic ending, “Simpson and Delilah” closes with a heartwarmingly awkward scene of affection between Homer and Marge that brings to mind the image of Samson finding rest with Delilah.

By comparing the two stories alongside various scholarly interpretations of the Samson narrative, one can see how The Simpsons has successfully borrowed and mirrored aspects and events from the Bible while still presenting its own message. Whereas the Bible can be taken as a warning against the deception of women, The Simpsons avoids creating this message by giving Marge the role of a reasonable and loving character. Though one could say that Homer, like Samson, was also a fool, he was not a “fool for love” in the way Samson was. Homer is simply a dimwit character who places too much importance on his physical appearance. Furthermore, The Simpsons clearly adopts the comic figure approach in presenting their message. Homer’s story is truly “able to acknowledge a tragic perspective and yet refuse it. It accepts, without illusion and without despair, the imperfections of the human condition” similar to what Exum described about the Samson narrative. Homer is without a doubt an imperfect character just like Samson. However, in the “comic vision” of The Simpsons, he is accepted as who he is and in the end is received with love and arms wide open, rather than death, at the end of his tragic descent.

While the majority of scholars have interpreted the purpose of the Samson narrative to be to “assert the dependence of all men on God Almighty,” The creators of The Simpsons have presented an opposing message in “Simpson and Delilah” using the well-known Samson and

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24 Exum, “Many Faces of Samson”, 14
25 Exum, “Many Faces of Samson”, 21
26 Ibid
Delilah narrative from the Bible as the foundation. In “Simpson and Delilah,” Homer learns not to depend on something as superficial as his hair; he learns that he alone was responsible for all of his accomplishments. However, the final message the viewer is left with is that physical appearance, occupation, and personal failures do not matter when it comes to finding love and happiness. Thus, despite the use of Samson as the inspiration for the episode, the message portrayed by *The Simpsons* differs greatly from any message scholars have found within the biblical story itself.