

SAMSON'S DANITE ORIGINS AS
BACKGROUND FOR MILTON'S
SAMSON AGONISTES

By

MARTHA PULLEN MCLACHLAN

Bachelor of Arts

Baylor University

Waco, Texas

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Thesis Approved:

David S. Berkeley
Thesis Adviser

John M. Stewart
William R. Hays

Norman N. Denham
Dean of the Graduate College

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SAMSON'S DANITE ORIGINS AS BACKGROUND
FOR MILTON'S SAMSON AGONISTES

While many critics have written about the Biblical sources of Milton's tragedy, Samson Agonistes, no one to my knowledge has dealt meaningfully with the subject of Samson's Danite origins. Samson's specific tribe, one apprehends, has no significant import to the critics of the play. The importance that Milton attached to Samson as a Danite may well have been influenced by the reputation of the tribe of Dan as perceived by patristic and Renaissance Biblical commentators, not to mention the Bible. In the book of Judges the tribe of Dan is presented as the meanest of the twelve because of its idolatry. According to "natural" thinking, it would be unlikely that God would raise a champion out of this tribe. The reputation of this despicable tribe would certainly be in the minds of the more learned seventeenth-century readership, to whom the play by virtue of being a closet drama was addressed.

Milton's emphasis on the tribe of Dan, as shown by his having a chorus of murmuring Danites and Samson's cloth-merchant-like-father, Manoa, suggests that the poet is trying to depict God's sovereignty in choosing a person of such poor cultural and hereditary background to be a judge, i.e., military champion, of Israel and therefore an executor of

His judgments against the Philistines. By suggesting the relevance of Biblical commentators and writers of the patristic and Renaissance periods and by bringing into focus certain passages from the play itself, I will show how the poet developed this theme in his tragedy.

As an example of how the Church Fathers viewed God's selection of His champions, we find that Salvian, A. D. 400-480, in The Writings of Salvian, the Presbyter, states that "when God wished it clearly understood that great deeds were done by Him, they were done through a few or through the lowliest, lest the work of His heavenly hand be attributed to human strength."¹ Although Salvian does not mention Samson by name, another of the Church Fathers does. St. Caesarius of Arles, A. D. 469-542, in his "Sermon 118" quotes St. Augustine as saying that "the strength which Samson possessed . . . came from the grace of God rather than by nature, for if he had been naturally strong his power would not have been taken away when his hair was cut. Where, then was that most powerful strength, except in what the Scripture says: 'The spirit of the Lord walked with him'? Therefore, his strength belonged to the spirit of the Lord. In Samson was the vessel, but the fullness was in the spirit."² Samson's physical mediocrity apart from God's special endowment is an illustration of Danite mediocre-to-low quality in matters of heredity. In Samson Agonistes Milton makes a point of Harapha's breeding in connection with his physical strength with the obvious intention, since Harapha is an unbiblical

character, of making this Philistine giant a foil to Samson.

In the Renaissance we find that Richard Rogers, in his A Commentary Vpon the Whole Booke of Judges, very plainly declares God's sovereignty in dealing with Samson and also stresses the low estate of the tribe of Dan. He writes that

the Lord doth raise a deliuerer out of the tribe of Dan, in which this place Zorah was, neere to Eshtaol, as verse 25 sheweth; this tribe being one of the meanest: It teacheth that God will serve himselfe by the meaner sort as well as by the mightier and greater, when it pleaseth him. For if he furnish them with gifts fitting, for that he setteth them about (whereof they are as capeable [sic] as the other) thereby he enables them for the worke, which not their birth or wealth alone can doe, as we have seene before. . . . That euen out of the meane or middle sort of people, the Lord chuseth many, yea most to be heires of salvation: and to vse our Sauours words, Matth. 11. to be seasoned with the Gospell by beleeuing (for so I expound the words.) And doubtlesse in comparison of these, few great ones are called: nay many who have striven against mediocritie of estate (which

yet Agur preferreth as the best to serve
 God in) they have forsaken their owne mercy.³

Rogers' comments on Samson suggest that Milton in choosing this person as protagonist of a tragedy, whatever he may have intimated in his preface to Samson Agonistes, did not choose a tragic hero of whom Aristotle would think, for reasons of birth or status, above the common level.

Jacob's prophecies concerning Dan as understood by several Renaissance commentators are relevant to Milton's depiction of Samson and the Danite chorus. Some have also emphasized the low condition of the tribe of Dan. Martin Luther, in his commentary on Jacob's blessing of the twelve tribes found in "Lectures on Genesis Chapters 45-50," states that

Samson never had an army as the other leaders or judges of Israel had. But all alone, without help and arms, he did very great things at the urging of the spirit. . . . Accordingly, Samson was a remarkable warrior and savior above all the others. He did everything at the prompting and impulse of the Spirit, even in death itself. . . . Thus Samson, whether he was in Israel or among the Philistines, in Gath or in Eshtaol, trusted in God and rushed against the foe with the

same fury. And nowhere in the histories of the heathen or of Holy Scripture is there a similar example of a warrior so brave and invincible--a warrior who had the courage to rise up and fight against a whole nation and gained so many exceedingly brilliant victories without any army or military equipment, although he was not different from others either in stature or in appearance. Yet he had greater strength and superior vigor.⁴

Luther not only emphasizes God's sovereignty in Samson's life, but also stresses Samson's ordinary outward appearance. Milton, evidently interpreting Judges in a similar manner, magnifies Samson's solitary role, (ll. 341-8), and "trivial" weapons, (ll. 1093-5), in combatting the Philistines, and declines to endow his protagonist with a Charles Atlas physique.

Another Renaissance writer, Francis Rollenson, in his commentary on Genesis 49 in his work, Twelve Prophetical Legacies or Sermons upon Jacobs Last Will and Testament, shows the low condition of the tribe of Dan by stressing Dan's illegitimacy:

Dan was the Sonne of Iacob by Bilhah the Hand-maide of Rahel. . . . vpon that contract with Bilha was Dan borne; as I said before in my lecture vpon Isachar; Laban by

deceite made Iacob to diuide his Rib and
 to haue two sisters to be his wiues; and
 his two wiues being sisters by their per-
 suasions made their owne husband to be
Tetragamos the husband of fower wiues,
 the one giuing him Bilha, the other Zil-
 pha, their handmaids to be his Concubines;
 now herein how can Iacob be excused?⁵

In fact, Rollenson states that all Jacob's children, except Joseph and Benjamin, the sons of Rachel to whom Jacob was first contracted, were illegitimate. The poor hereditary and cultural background--it is difficult here to distinguish between these two--resulted in the disappearance of these ten tribes at the hand of the Assyrians in 722 B. C. The elite Jewish tribes were Benjamin, presumably given the honor of front rank in the acies Judaorum as intimated by the Israeli battle-cry, "After thee O Benjamin," and, a fortiori, Judah, the royal tribe. If Samson were to be in any sense a "knightly" antagonist to Harapha, he would derive from one or the other of these tribes.

Continuing his commentary, Rollenson emphasizes again the low condition of the tribe of Dan, but at the same time stresses the worthiness of Samson in his remarks concerning Jacob's blessing:

'Dan shall iudge his people, as one of the
 Tribes of Israell.' Iacob in his prophecie

concerning Dan, alludeth vnto his name which by interpretation is iudgement, or reuege [sic], according to which significations, these wordes 'Dan shall iudge his people,' may two maner of waies be paraphrased; first Dans tribe as well as any other of the tribes of Israel shall afforde a Iudge, or one that shall be a Prince and ruler of his people, this was accomplished in (t) Sampson, who iudged Israel twentie yeares, and this was a great glory to the tribe of Dan; for the the Tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Gad, and Asher were the more ignoble, because God did not raise vp any out of them to iudge Israel, secondly, 'Dan shall iudge his people,' that is to say (v) One of his familie shall bee auenged vpon the Philistines for their hatred and crueltie against Israel, and this was Samson, then whom neuer was there any Israelite more miraculously victorious ouer the enemies of God, for (x) 'with the Iawe-bone of an Asse hee slewe a thousand men;' in these wordes Iacob comforteth his sonne Dan, who because hee was the sonne but of a Concubine, was therefore no doubt the lesse regarded in his familie; and also foreseeing that the inheritance of his Tribe in

the land of promise, should not be like vnto the rest, therefore that the other tribes should not contemne Dans, in comparison of themselues, hee telles them, that his Birth, and small possessions doe nothing at all em-paire his worthinesse, because out of his loins should come a Ruler, and a Reuenger in Israel: The worthiest & most valiant of all the Iudges of Israel was Samson a son of a meane Tribe, and yet God chose him to deliuer his people out of the handes of the Philistines, herein teaching vs first, that hee himselfe is not an acceptor of Persons; for the ostentation of Birth, and Parentage in his eye is but a Bubble, and worldly Possessions and wealth like Chaffe, or dust before the winde; secondly, hee instructeth hereby, all great families, how they should behaue themselues towards their inferiours, Iudah though he haue the Kingdome, though Ioseph hath obtained the Birthright, and though Leui be inuested in the Priesthood, yet must neither Leui, Ioseph, nor Iudah contemne Dan the son of a Concubine, because hee also as well as they shall iudge his people, and deliuer Israel.⁶

In Milton's play neither Samson nor Manoa nor the Danites ever mention their lowly tribal origins. The poet depended on the reader to know this. The poor reputation of Dan, as I try to make evident, was an accepted idea in Old Testament interpretation. Being brought to bear on Samson Agonistes by the special prominence that Milton gives Dan, the effect is to stress God's frequent and perhaps customary disregard of gently born persons in choosing his champions, as Rollenson says.

Gervase Babington, another Renaissance Biblical commentator, in his work, Certain Plaine, Briefe and Comfortable Notes upon Every Chapter of Genesis, emphasizes the serpentine subtlety that Jacob prophesies of the Danites. He suggests that the tribe has made its way through treasons, stratagems, and spoils rather than prevailing in fair fight with the enemy. He writes:

'Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an
adder by the path, biting the horse heeles,
so that his rider shall fall backward.' The
sence is this: Dan also shall haue the hon-
our of a tribe, and shall in subtilty and
craft abound, being that way like a serpent,
also that way hee shall pinch his enemies,
and giue them ouerthrowes, biting as it
were the 'Horse heeles,' so that his rider
shall fall backward. . . . ?

Although Samson in Milton's play shares the tribal subtlety, he prevails over Harapha by offer of a fair and open fight, and in the contest with the Philistines he openly before all razes the Temple. Thus Samson transcends tribal limitations as one especially endued with the power of God.

Another Renaissance commentator, John Calvin, implies Samson's bastard origins, something in the background of Milton's protagonist, by dwelling on Jacob's adulterous connection with Bilha:

The maide was Bilhah. She bare not therefore for her selfe but for her maistresse, who challenging y childe vnto her got there by the honour of a mother. But Rachel did wickedly, who desired to be made a mother, by an unlawfull mean, & as it were in despite of God. 5 [And Bilhah conceiued] it is meruel that God honoreth an adulterous coniunction with children: but thus sometime he striueth by benefites with the wickednesse of men, and bestoweth his grace vpon those that are unworthie. And neither doeth he shake off sluggish negligence with the same celeritie, but wayteth for a conuenient time of correction. Therefore he would haue them to be reckoned among the lawfull sonnes, which were begotten in this

wicked coniunction: euen as a little before Moses called Bilhah a wife, who notwithstanding deserued to be called an harlot.⁸

Renaissance readers thought of bastards as base, as Edmund in King Lear intimates. The flawed origins of the tribe, as Calvin makes clear, in effect rendered the Danites a tribe of bastards.

Calvin also stresses the low estate of the tribe of Dan in his The Sermons upon the Fifth Booke of Moses Called Deuteronomie in which he says: "Now it followeth afterward, 'that Dan is as a Lyonswhelp, & that he shall go out of Bashan.' No doubt but y here Moses intended to strengthen y trybe of Dan, & to giue them courage because they were few in number. They were a trybe of no great reputation, & they seemed not worthie to be made account of."⁹

The New Testament is not devoid of implications reflecting the low religious condition of Dan and by extension of Danite culture in every sense of the word. The book of The Revelation omits the tribe of Dan in the roll call of the tribes in chapter seven. William Cowper, in his work, Pathmos: or a Commentary upon the Revelation of St. John, states that

the true causes of Dan his omission, we are rather to thinke to be these two: first, of all the twelue Tribes they fell first to

Idolatry, and continued therein untill the day of the captiuity of the Land, as is plainely told vs in the eighteenth of Iudges. Secondly, they were carelesse to prouide for themselues, inheritance in Canaan, after that the remnant Tribes were all settled, yet had they a great part of their inheritance to seeke. Now we must remember, that earthly Canaan to them was a type of the heauenly Canaan; they were carelesse of the one, and now no more remembred in the roule of them that shall bee in the other.¹⁰

Thomas Hayne, in his work, The General View of the Holy Scriptures, comments on the primacy of Dan among the tribes of Israel given to idolatry--an emphasis that is perhaps seen in Samson's hubristic strutting before the Philistine army, (ll. 135-45), and in some of the less-than-pious stasima of the Chorus:

In the Reuel. 7, Where the Tribes are sealed Dan is left out. Therevpon some have been of opinion, That Antichrist shall come of the Tribe of Dan. . . . The Reason . . . why Dan in the Reuelation is omitted, is: becavse that when the children of Israel were settled in

Chanaan, Dan first of any Tribe set vp Idolatry, and remoued the grauen image ovt of Michahs priuate hovse, and took it to themselues for to haue it worshipped by the whole Tribe. Yea they were so giuen vp to this idolatry, that they continved in it untill the removing of the Ark from Shiloh. Yet seeing that in Christ all the families of the earth are blessed, and that the Spirit of God still holdeth to the number of twelue Tribes, Dan is there to be vnderstood with the rest.¹¹

Hayne's characterization of Dan as being receptive to the spirit of God in spite of its spiritual declension has its counterpart in Samson's notable regeneration from despair and powerlessness.

Turning now to the play itself, we see that Milton allotted a little more than one-fourth of the 1,758 lines to the Danite Chorus. Among the Hebrews physical power and spiritual strength went hand in hand: if the latter declined, so did the former. The Danite chorus, quite appropriately in view of their idolatrous proclivities, expresses the milieu from which Samson sprang:

God of our Fathers, what is man!

That thou towards him with hand so various,

Or might I say contrarious,
 Temper'st thy providence through his short course,
 Not evenly, as thou rul'st
 Th' Angelic orders and inferior creatures mute
 Irrational and brute.¹²

The importance Milton attached to Samson as a Danite can also be seen in the following lines which underscore the theme of God's sovereignty in choosing a champion with poor cultural and hereditary background. The Chorus, soon after glimpsing Samson for the first time since his captivity, contrasts good fortune and high birth with Samson's strength and virtue of his best days:

For him I reckon not in high estate
Whom long descent of birth
Or the sphere of fortune raises:
 But thee whose strength, while virtue was her mate,
 Might have subdu'd the Earth,
 Universally crown'd with highest praises. (ll. 170-5)
 (italics mine)

Thus an opposition between the fortuity of high blood and Samson's combined power and piety is brought to notice.

Milton makes overt the theme of knightly gentility versus divine election of the obscure and lowly in the following speech assigned to Harapha:

Men call me Harapha, of stock renownd

As Og or Anak and the Emims old
 That Kiriathaim held, thou knowst me now
 If thou at all art known. Much I have heard
 Of thy prodigious might and feats performd
 Incredible to me, in this displeas'd,
 That I was never present on the place
 Of those encounters, where we might have tri'd
 Each others force in camp or listed field:
 And now am come to see of whom such noise
 Hath walkt about, and each limb to survey,
 If thy appearance answer loud report. (ll. 1079-90)

Since Harapha is not in the Biblical account in the book of Judges, it would appear that Milton created him for the express purpose of being a foil to Samson. The giant's presence in the drama intensifies the theme of God's sovereignty in Samson's life. Harapha's blasphemy of Israel's God enhances this theme. The Philistine accuses Samson of using "Magician's Art" in accomplishing his past feats of strength:

Thou durst not thus disparage glorious arms
 Which greatest Heroes have in battel worn,
 Thir ornament and safety, had not spells
 And black enchantments, some Magician's Art
 Armd thee or charmd thee strong, which thou from
 Heaven
 Feigndst at thy birth was giv'n thee in thy hair,
 Where strength can least abide, though all thy

hairs

Were bristles rang'd like those that ridge the back
Of chaf't wild Boars, or ruffl'd

Porcupines. (ll. 1130-8)

Samson replies by attributing his strength to the "living God." He implicitly disavows possession of inherited strength:

I know no spells, use no forbidden Arts:
My trust is in the living God who gave me
At my Nativity this strength, diffus'd
No less through all my sinews, joints and bones,
Than thine, while I preserv'd these locks unshorn,
The pledge of my unviolated vow. (ll. 1139-44)

The theme of God's sovereignty in choosing a person of such poor cultural and hereditary background to be a champion, though not the main theme, is nevertheless, judging from the prominence given the Chorus, Manoa, and Harapha, by no means obscure. It appears to be an idea of some prominence and is perhaps related to the main theme, which I perceive to be the recovery of Samson as a champion of God. This secondary theme contributes at once to the inscrutability of the Hebrew deity in choosing unlikely champions, as Mary says in the Magnificat, "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree."¹³

Milton in Samson Agonistes differs greatly from

Shakspeare whose nearly forty plays never once, except at the end of Henry V and the character of Cornwall's First Servant in King Lear, attribute knightly prowess to persons below the rank of gentlemen. Generally speaking, one might say that Shakspeare's plays suggest that there are only two kinds of persons, base-borns and the gentles, with the more ordinary virtues and common vices being associated with the former and the more admirable qualities of human nature being showered on the latter. In Samson Agonistes Milton differs from the democratic tendencies as seen in Dekker's The Shoemaker's Holiday and in Webster's Duchess of Malfi, both of which emphasize, as indeed Marlowe does, the ability of plebeians to rise to positions of eminence.

Samson Agonistes, unlike the works of playwrights who have been mentioned, suggests a world in which champions elected by God from unlikely persons are pitted against hordes of unbelievers and also in some degree against great numbers of their own somewhat apostate countrymen. In this play we find a dramatization of Milton's mature idea of predestination, i. e., not election to salvation but election to eminent service on behalf of God by persons chosen for his purposes. Milton must have thought in his own way that he was like Samson.

NOTES

¹ The Fathers of the Church, trans. Jeremiah F. O'Sullivan, (Washington D. C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1962), III, p. 195.

² Ibid., XLVII, p. 182.

³ (London, 1615), p. 611.

⁴ Luther's Works, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1966), VIII, pp. 281-2.

⁵ (London, 1612), p. 136.

⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

⁷ (London, 1596), pp. 150-1.

⁸ (London, 1583), p. 624.

⁹ (London, 1583), p. 1225.

¹⁰ (London, 1623), p. 899.

¹¹ (London, 1564), p. 201.

¹² John Milton Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), p. 567, ll. 667-73. All quotations from Samson Agonistes will be from this edition, and line-numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

¹³ This quotation is from the King James Version of the Bible.

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The King James Version of the Bible.

VITA

Martha Pullen McLachlan

Candidate for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Thesis: SAMSON'S DANITE ORIGINS AS BACKGROUND FOR
MILTON'S SAMSON AGONISTES

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Fort Worth, Texas, 4 November
1929, the daughter of Homer and Florine Pullen.

Education: Was graduated by Arlington Heights High
School, Fort Worth, Texas, in May 1947; received
Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Education
from Baylor University in 1951; completed require-
ments for the Master of Arts degree at Oklahoma
State University in December, 1977.

Professional Experience: Teacher of fifth grade at
La Vega Public School, Bellmead, Texas, 1951-52.