

SAMSON

Theme: Samson is one of the heroes of the Book of Judges, although he did not play a juridical role. He was just a military hero and one of the Jews who fought the Philistines during the conquest of the Holy Land.

Keywords: Samson, Philistines, Palestine, Old Testament, Christian Iconography

Summary: according to the Book of Judges, before Samson's birth, God had asked their parents not to cut his hair or to offer him alcoholic beverages, because he should be a *nazareneus*¹. Later on Samson married a Philistine wife. But, since he belonged to the Jewish community, he had numerous conflicts with his family-in-law and other Philistines.

In this atmosphere, his heroic deeds began. Firstly, he fought a young lion with his own hands and he won. Afterwards he crossed in front of the dead lion, found a honeycomb, took it and ate peacefully. Then he captured three hundred vixens, tied tail to tail in pairs, set fire on them and threw them into a Philistine field. Subsequently he took a donkey jaw and killed one thousand Philistines with it. Later on, God made water arise from a spring so that Samson could drink after fighting the Philistines. Some days later Samson, who was surrounded by his enemies in the city of Gaza, got up in the middle of the night, picked the doors of the city and, putting them on his shoulders, walked to the top of a hill.

It was Delilah, a pretty Philistine woman, the only one who could defeat Samson. Delilah seduced him with one single aim, to know the secret of his strength. Samson lied to her three times: first he told her that he would lose his strength if he were tied with seven wet ropes, second if he were tied with new ropes, and third if his seven plaits were tied. But none of those statements were true. Finally he confessed his secret: never his hair had been cut. Delilah made him fall asleep on her lap and had his hair cut. He lost his strength and the Philistines captured him, pulled out his eyes and led him into prison. Later on, they obliged him to dance during a crowded religious ceremony. Samson, whose hair was then long, implored to God to recover his strength. Then he could push down two enormous columns so that not only the Philistines but also he himself would die.

Attributes and types of representation: Samson is easily recognized by his long hair and sometimes also by his bushy beard.

The cycle of Samson's life was sometimes completely depicted, for example in the Saint Louis Psalter from the 13th century, and in the Cardinal Maciejowski Bible, ca. 1255. But the depiction of one single heroic deed was the usual way of representing

¹ Nazareneus: according to Spanish dictionary of RAE, nazareneus means consecrated to God, and for that reason, he should not drink alcoholic beverages nor make his hair cut.

GOOSEN, Louis (2006): *De Abdías a Zacarías: temas del Antiguo Testamento en la religión, las artes plásticas, la literatura, la música y el teatro*. Akal, Madrid, p.243, explains accurately which was the nazareateo (Numbers 6, 1-21; Amos 2, 11-12): "tal cosa suponía que el varón [...] debía atenerse a determinados preceptos ascéticos en cuanto a los alimentos, evitar el contacto con los muertos y permanecer intonso [...] Existen indicios de que la costumbre cananita de la ofrenda capilar era asimilada y utilizada como símbolo de la competición sagrada en que el propio Yahvé elegía a sus candidatos [...] El nazareateo no tenía *per se* carácter vitalicio y podía ser invalidado en el templo".

him, being the most common one the fight of Samson against the lion², and after that one, the fight of the hero against one thousand Philistines. These depictions usually follow the written text. Nevertheless there is a slight difference between text and image concerning the episode of the thirst of Samson. While the Bible says that God makes water pour from a spring (Judges 15, 19), in works of art water pours from the donkey jaw, previously used by Samson to fight the Philistines.

Before concluding this part, we should add that sometimes Samson's life is compared with Christ's life by using the typological system (for more details see *typology and related themes*).

Primary sources: Samson's biography was told in Judges 13-16, but not all the verses were used in the iconographical creation. Let's quote now the main texts that had an impact on art³:

- Samson kills the lion by breaking his jaw (Judges 14, 5-6): "Samson went down to Timnah together with his father and mother. As they approached the vineyards of Timnah, suddenly a young lion came roaring toward him. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat. But he told neither his father nor his mother what he had done."
- Samson eats the honeycomb (Judges 14, 8-9): "Some time later, when he went back to marry her, he turned aside to look at the lion's carcass. In it was a swarm of bees and some honey, which he scooped out with his hands and ate as he went along. When he rejoined his parents, he gave them some, and they too ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the lion's carcass."
- Samson sets fire on three hundred vixens (Judges 15, 4-5): "So he went out and caught three hundred foxes and tied them tail to tail in pairs. He then fastened a torch to every pair of tails, lit the torches and let the foxes loose in the standing grain of the Philistines. He burned up the shocks and standing grain, together with the vineyards and olive groves."
- Samson kills one thousand Philistines (Judges 15, 15): "Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men".
- Samson drinks the water that God offers to him (Judges 15, 18-19): "Because he was very thirsty, he cried out to the Lord, "You have given your servant this great victory. Must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" Then God opened up the hollow place in Lehi, and water came out of it. When Samson drank, his strength returned and he revived. So the spring was called En Hakkore, and it is still there in Lehi".

² Judges 14, 6: "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat".

³ Quotations from Gateway Bible, available on <http://www.biblegateway.com/> (Last access on 20th June 2010)

- Samson pulls out the doors of Gaza (Judges 16, 2): "The people of Gaza were told, "Samson is here!" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "At dawn we'll kill him."
- Samson and Delilah (Judges 16, 4- 31): click on the following link:

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=judges%2016&version=NIV>

Other sources, non written sources: other sources such as liturgy, oral traditions or popular religious practices, seem not to have made an impact on Samson's iconography.

Geographical and chronological framework: While Jewish had a low consideration of Samson because of his weakness in front of Delilah, Christians admired his numerous victories against his enemies, considering them a gift of God to his fidelity⁴. For that reason, Samson, although playing a secondary role in the Old Testament, played an important role in Christian iconography.

Probably one of the most ancient depictions of Samson is the one in the Early Christian Catacomb of Via Latina (4th century): one of the wall paintings shows Samson killing the lion and eating the honey, and another one shows him killing the Philistines with the donkey's jawbone⁵. Then, there are some depictions of his life in Byzantine manuscript illumination, as for example in Gregory of Nazianzus' *Homilies* (9th century, BNF). However, the iconography of Samson was really successful in Western art, and more specifically in Romanesque sculpture, where his fight against the lion became very popular (see for example an Autun capital, the Revilla de Santullán capital, or the Gurk Cathedral tympanum, all from the 12th century). The interest on Samson did not disappear during Late Middle Ages, having identified different examples of that period in Italy, Germany, England, France and Spain (see for example Saint Louis Psalter, 13th century, Alpirsbach Monastery's stained glass windows, 13th century, the Peruggia Fountain by Nicola Pisano, 14th century, etc.). Not only was he still popular at the very end of Middle Ages, but also in Modern times Samson is present in works of art (for more details see *precedents, transformation and projection*).

Artistic media and techniques: Samson cycles were depicted on a great variety of artistic media and techniques (wall painting, stained glass windows, illuminated books, stone carving, etc.). Nevertheless, depending on the period, certain media and techniques were more popular than others, so that in Romanesque art Samson was frequently depicted on stone capitals while in Gothic art Samson was usually depicted on illuminated manuscripts since this media was more appropriate for complete life's cycles and typological comparisons.

Precedents, transformation and projection: Samson is the Jewish Heracles who personifies the fight between the Jews and the Philistines. His deeds are similar to those of Heracles, although inspired in the Palestine world⁶. For that reason Samson breaking the jaws of the lion is related to Heracles pulling out the fur of the Nemea lion.

⁴ GOOSEN (2006), op.cit., p. 243.

⁵ In Via Latina Catacomb there is the Heracles cycle, so there is a comparison between the Jew hero (Samson) and the Greek one (Heracles). For more details see: *precedents, transformation and projection*.

⁶ RÉAU, Louis (1955-1959): *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, vol. II- part I, p. 236.

During the Middle Ages, Samson's iconographical cycle did not suffer from radical changes. It was in Modern times when there was a change in the choice of stories, so that the relationship between Samson and Delilah became the central point of his life (see for example the work of Rubens and Rembrandt). Samson was depicted with the same long hair as in the Middle Ages. But then, in Modern times, and for the first time, he could be depicted naked, as the Antiquity heroes, so that he could exhibit his tremendous strength.

Typology and related themes: During 4th and 5th century, authors such as Saint Ambrose, Saint Pauline of Nola, Saint Caesar of Arles, and Procopius of Gaza insisted on the comparison between Samson and Christ⁷. Thus, the fight against the lion was the prefiguration of Christ fighting Satan, the broken doors of Gaza was the prefiguration of either the Harrowing of Hell or the opened stoned tomb of Christ, and finally Samson having the doors on his shoulder was the prefiguration of Christ having the cross on his shoulder.

Nonetheless, Samson was also related to other figures of the Old Testament. Consequently the donkey's jawbone used to fight the Philistines was incorporated into the depiction of Cain killing his brother Abel.

Moreover, his fight with the lion was very similar to that of David who, being just a child, had protected his flock from the attack of lions and bears. It is not easy to know if an image depicts either David or Samson when they fight the lion. However, David is usually depicted near some sheep and a bear, and dressed in shepherd clothes. As an example, we could see a Vézelay capital (12th century) where young David breaks the jaw of the lion while the lion is about to attack a sheep.

Images:

- Samson and the lion, Via Latina Catacomb in Rome (Italy), wall painting, ca. 350.
- Samson's cycles, *Gregory of Nazianzus's Homilies*, coming from Constantinople (Turkey), illuminated manuscript, 9th century, today in the BNF, Ms. Grec 510, fol. 347v.
- Samson and the lion, Capital of the Church of Saint Cipriano in Revilla de Santullán (Spain), stone carving, 12th century.
- Samson's cycle, Saint Louis's Psalter, Paris (France), illuminated manuscript, 1270, today in the BNF, Ms. Latin 10525, fol. 56, 57v, 58, 59v, 60
- Samson and the Philistines, *Bible by Guiard de Moulins*, Paris (France), illuminated manuscript, 1320-1330, today in the BNF, Ms. français 8 , fol. 119
- Samson breaking the lion's jaw and Samson leaving Gaza as the prefiguration of Christ leaving the tomb, *Speculum humanae salvationis*, from Bologna (Italy), illuminated manuscript, second half of 14th century, today in the BNF, ms. Arsenal 593, fol. 23v and fol. 26.
- Samson and the lion, Delilah cutting Samson's hair, and the Philistines blinding Samson, *Speculum Historiale* by Vicent Beauvais translated by Jean de Vignay, Paris (France), illuminated manuscript, 1463, today in the BNF, ms. français 50, fol. 73 v.

⁷ GOOSEN (2006), op.cit., p.243.

- Samson and Delilah, Luca Cranach the Older, oil canvas, ca. 1529-1530, today in the Metropolitan Museum of New York (USA)

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Author and email address: Irene González Hernando irgonzal@ghis.ucm.es