The story of Samson has inspired in the course of time many artist to produce examples of what J. Cheryl Exum calls ‘the fruitfulness of allowing for a mutual influence between the Bible and the arts’ (Exum 1998, 425). The following contribution describing some of these paintings will illustrate that Exum rightly states ‘that artistic interpretations can influence biblical interpretation in unexpected ways’. It is interesting to look at the many works of art based on the stories in Judges 13–16 from a specific point of view: was Samson represented as a good-looking man? Some paintings also attract the attention by the way they picture how Samson looked at the moment he realizes that he is betrayed by Delilah.

The Good-Looking Samson

It comes as no surprise that in most paintings and drawings Samson is pictured not only as a strong man, but also according to the fashion of the day as a handsome man. The same can be observed in the many movies about Samson (Houtman and Spronk 2004, 228–246) and with other biblical characters, like Moses (Spronk 2006). In a number of paintings Samson’s beauty seems to be particularly emphasized. The first to be discussed here (in chronological order) is a painting by the Italian painter Guido Reni (1575–1642).

In 1612 he pictured an almost completely nude Samson celebrating his triumph over the Philistines (Judg 15:14–16). Only his private parts are covered by a cloth elegantly moving around his hips and kept in place by his left hand. He is standing with one foot on a slain (fully clothed) enemy. With his right hand he holds the jaw bone of an ass, which had functioned as his deadly weapon, above his head. Samson looks up at the jaw bone and seems to drink some kind of liquid pouring down from it. This drinking is a strange element, because the story in Judges does not mention it. There may be a connection to the next scene, where Samson complains about thirst.
Reni made this painting in Rome, where he lived since 1602 as a greatly respected artist for twenty years. He took the subjects for his paintings mostly from the Bible and Greek mythology. The painting of Samson can be regarded as a kind of mix. It combines the beauty of the naked human body, as is found in many of the mythological scenes, with the representation of a biblical story, which is usually painted less exuberantly by Reni, like for instance his painting about the gathering of the manna in 1614. One may notice a development in this matter in the work of Reni. The way he
picted David with the head of Goliath in 1605 is far more reluctant with regard to the human body than his later paintings of the holy Sebastian and of John the Baptist. Like the portrait of the victorious Samson these painting are regarded by some as homoerotic. The painting of Samson is used as such in the work of the modern German artist Harald Seiwert.

Another painting of Samson with much emphasis on the beauty of his body was made by John Francis Rigaud (1742–1810).

On this painting made in 1784 about what is described in Judges 16:12 one sees an almost completely naked Samson lying on his right side. He is looking over his left shoulder to Delilah. She is standing behind Samson. So she is not fully portrayed. Unlike Samson she is wearing clothes. Only part of one breast is exposed. In the background, behind a curtain held by Delilah, the faces of two Philistines can be seen. They appear to be fleeing, because Samson is freeing himself from the ropes with which he was bound. The one around his ankles are already broken. He is now straining the mighty muscles of his arms to break the ropes around his wrists.

Fig. 2.
The body of Samson almost completely fills the canvas. Especially his strong legs capture the eyes of the spectator. Samson is master of the situation. He looks right into the eyes of Delilah and shows no fear or amazement.

According to contemporaries there are clear correspondences with his earlier, now lost, masterpiece ‘Hercules resting from his labors’ (Myrone 2005, 254–256), where he seems to have based the pose for the figure of Samson on Michelangelo’s figure of Haman in the Sistine Chapel.

A well known and much copied picture of Samson stems from the Spanish artist Léon Joseph Florentin Bonnat (1833–1922), who made in 1891 a painting ‘Samson’s youth’ about the young hero killing a lion (Judges 14:5–6).

In the course of time this scene was very often pictured. This was especially furthered by the Christian tradition about Samson prefiguring Jesus Christ. The killing of the lion was seen within this framework: ‘As Samson tore apart the lion, death’s likeness, so Christ ripped death asunder’ (Gunn 2005, 175; Houtman and Spronk 2004, 79–81). Never before, however, had Samson been pictured in this situation in this way: fully naked, as a very

Fig. 3.
good-looking, beautifully muscled young man. According to some interpreters Samson is modeled after the classical, first century sculpture of Laocoön, now at the Vatican. In the school where Bonnat worked as a student and as a professor, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, this was often used as a learning tool for students in order to master the depiction of physical struggle and pain.

**The Bad-Looking Samson**

One of the most remarkable paintings of Samson is the one by the German artist Lovis Corinth (1858–1925): ‘Der geblendete Simson’ (1912). Lovis can be regarded as one of the leaders of German Impressionism (Schuster 1996, Laux 1998). He was very popular in his days and, as clearly indicated by the many self-portraits, enjoyed life with all the good things it had to offer him. He was big and handsome and his interest in beautiful women was certainly not left unanswered. In 1911 his life changed abruptly, when he suffered a severe stroke leaving him partially paralyzed. He quickly recovered, but not completely. Since then his style changed. His paintings became more expressionist in feeling. It is interesting to note that as Hitler rose to power Corinth’s early works were left undisturbed but his works executed after his stroke were considered ‘degenerate’.

The first great painting after his stroke was a representation of Samson after he was blinded by the Philistines. He had made a sketch on the same subject twenty years earlier. The painting is more dramatic, which is increased by the use of colors. Now one notices that the towel covering Samson’s eye sockets is stained with blood which is also running down his cheek. Comparing the works it appears that the artist has developed more affinity with bodily suffering. Corinth must have felt some kind of relationship with Samson. He was known for his physical strength, fully enjoyed life with his young wife and was very productive. This passionate artist then, at the prime of his life, experienced a cruel physical setback. His struggle to cope with all this returns in the subjects he now chose to paint and in the way he expressed pain and suffering. In the same period Corinth made a sketch of a tormented Job and his friends. There are a number of correspondences between the two works, for instance, in the striking groping bony hands. Another related work is his ‘Ecce Homo’, a water color drawing of the suffering Jesus, which he later also painted in oil. A detail found in both these paintings is the bright red blood dripping from the crown of thorns and the eye sockets respectively.
This picture of Samson clearly deviates from the traditional way in which he is rendered. One usually pictures him in the same way as classical heroes like Hercules, according to the ideals of one's time concerning the strong man. Seeing the painting of Corinth for the first time, one is shocked. It recalls the painting by Rembrandt of the Philistine soldiers
gouging out his eyes with a treacherous Delilah in the background holding Samson’s locks in one and the scissors in the other hand. Corinth has in the first place painted Samson here in his loneliness. He seems to be silently grinning with pain. There is no reference to his past, to his faults, nor any hint at a possible positive outcome.

In an essay on this painting Exum goes one step further: Samson is represented here as abandoned by his God: ‘I see in this painting a Samson totally alone, with no resources left to him, a Samson dispensable in God’s plan; in other words, a tragic Samson. This is not just a Samson who has been betrayed into the hands of his enemies by the woman he loved, as we have in numerous paintings, but much more: a Samson broken by mere mortals (Delilah and the Philistines are nowhere in sight) but by the forces of the universe—a Samson abandoned by his god’ (Exum 1998, 418). Exum does not explicitly make the connection, but anyone familiar with the gospels will think here of what is said in the New Testament of Jesus Christ. Within the work of Corinth one can find this also indicated by the clear relation referred to above between his paintings of Samson and of Jesus.

One can also see a relation with Samson as pictured by Corinth with Job. Something similar can be observed with Milton. In his play Milton transformed the biblical story of external physical action ‘into a psychological and spiritual drama in which the crucial action occurs within Samson. An equally important shift is that Milton made the progress of Samson a story of patient suffering, repentance, and salvation.’ (Ryken 1993, 476). Milton’s portrayal of Samson apparently was influenced by the biblical depiction of the suffering Job, whereas he also modeled some of Samson’s speeches on the biblical lament psalms.

Another association evoked by Corinth’s painting is the possible relation with the suffering Servant of the Lord, of which is said in Isaiah 53:3–4 that he was ‘forsaken by men’, ‘a man of sorrows’ and ‘smitten by God’ (Spronk 2002). Samson and the Servant of the Lord, as described in Deutero Isaiah, are clearly opposites. From his birth on, Samson is the promising and blossoming strong man. The Servant grew up ‘like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or comeliness’ (Isa 53:2). At the end the roles are reversed. It is possible now to conclude, with Von Rad, that the story of Samson is primarily a history of ‘das Scheitern eines Charismatikers und das Bild einer vertanen Gotteskraft’ (Von Rad 1962, 346). However, precisely the aspect expressed in the painting by Corinth may help to find a more positive way of interpreting this story and relating it to the later prophecies. The shocking view on the limits of human strength can
function as an eye-opener for the right interpretation of the history of all powerful men in Israel; one which shows that the essence of the story of Samson lies not in the ruins of the temple of Dagon, but in the ruined life of the strong man who trusted in his own strength only.

Samson Looking

The biblical story of Samson gives the reader no specific information about his appearance. He must have had very long hair, but this is not explicitly mentioned. So one can only speculate how he looked like. We are much better informed about the viewpoints of Samson himself. Samson’s seeing (Hebrew ראה) is an important motif in Judges 14–16 (Kim 1993, 390–392).

It ‘emphasizes his being drawn after what he sees with his eyes, in other words, his impulses’ (Amit 1999, 281). The verb ראה is used not only in connection with Samson (14:1, 2, 8; 16:1), but also with the Philistines (14:21; 16:24, 27) and with Delilah (16:5, 18). Because of the use of ראה hif, ‘to appear’, namely of the messenger of YHWH in 13:3, 10, 21, and the reaction of Manoah and his wife about what they had seen (ראה qal in 13:22 and ראה hif in 13:23), there is also a relation with the previous story about the announcement of Samson’s birth.

One may note the balance between Samson and the Philistines, but also the development in this story indicated by this key word. Gradually the Philistines are gaining power over Samson, who does not foresee how he is getting closed in. In 14:1–2 Samson is presented as a man who follows his eyes: he sees a woman and then wants to marry her. In 14:8 he proves to be a good observer, noticing the strange phenomenon of bees making their home in the corpse of a lion. 16:1 repeats 14:1–2, but also marks a difference showing bad conduct of Samson. Again he sees a woman and instantly feels attracted to her. This time he does not consult his parents and has sex with her right away. After this it is no longer Samson who said to see people. Samson’s power over the Philistines goes together with his ability to see things in the right way. In the earlier confrontation the Philistines ‘see’ Samson coming at his wedding (14:11) and react by choosing thirty man to accompany him, but this appears to be not enough to control him. Whereas Samson gradually looses the right view, the Philistines are making progress. They have learned from Samson’s riddle and the way it was solved about the power of love and command Delilah to ‘see’ what is the source of Samson’s power (16:5) and who fulfils her task at the moment she ‘sees’ that Samson has
opened his heart for her (16:18). At the end Samson’s growing lack of insight is gruesomely confirmed by Samson losing his eye-sight, when the Philistines gouge out his eyes (16:21). In old Jewish commentaries this is interpreted as a Gods’ fitting punishment of Samson who rebelled with his eyes (Gunn 2005, 173–174).

The most famous painting concentrating on Samson’s eyesight is Rembrandt’s very realistic representation of his blinding by the Philistines. In contrast to Samson losing his eye sight stands Delila looking with her eyes wide open to the violent scene.

A more common theme in visual arts is the moment just before he is blinded, when Samson realizes that he is betrayed by Delilah and looks with mixed emotions into her eyes. We already encountered this in the painting by Rigaud. He did not picture the moment when Samson is definitively subdued by the Philistines, but a previous failed attempt. We do see, however, also in this painting the element of the eye contact. Good and well known examples of paintings about Samson making eye contact with Delilah at the moment he realizes that he no longer can overcome the Philistines are the works by Anthony van Dyck (1630) and Jan Steen (1670).

The most dramatic is the one painted in 1887 by the Jewish artist, born in London, Solomon J. Solomon (1860–1927).

The spectator is struck by the look of Samson with big eyes dilated with despair. Even more shocking is it to see Delilah, also with eyes wide open, taunting the captured Samson by waving his cut lock of hair at him. Solomon may have inspired by the Rembrandt’s painting, especially with regard to the posture of Delilah. The way in which Samson and Delilah are looking at each other is emphasized by the fact that one does not or only hardly see the eyes of the other persons in this scene.

It is, finally, interesting to note within this framework an interesting phenomenon in some recent paintings of Samson, namely that the picture shows that Samson is fully captured by Delilah. She has become part of him which causes that Samson can no longer see things clearly now. In a poster for the opera by Saint-Saëns Ralf Olbinski inserted a woman’s profile into the hair of Samson.

Samson has a beautiful body according to present standards, ‘like a god of the work-out’ (Passent 2003, 74). The artist also gives extra attention to the (not) looking of both Samson and Delilah. Samson’s eyes are shut, because he was betrayed while he was asleep. Delilah’s eyes are wide open, not showing much emotion. She is in control.
Fig. 5.

Fig. 6.
In a poster for the Orlando Opera Larry Moore went one step further: Delilah is now inside the head of Samson, at the moment he breaks the pillars of Dagan’s temple. The hero who has become a foolish lover is going to die with Delilah on his mind.
Fig. 8.
Bibliography


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