



In the latest movie version of the Samson saga, the hero is shown fighting against all odds, but with God on his side

By Gerard Condon

WITH ITS vivid portrayal of passion, sin and salvation, it is not surprising that the story of Samson has been brought to the big screen many times, most notably in 1949 by the maestro of the biblical epic, Cecil B. DeMille. This latest version, from *Pure Flix*, is an earnest, but flawed, retelling of the story from the Book of Judges, chapters 13-16.

The movie's opening credits briefly set out the historical context: Moses had led the Hebrews into the Promised Land. Each of the 12 tribes then settled a different part of Israel. Moses was succeeded by Joshua and then by successive 'judges', who defended the people with varying degrees of success. Samson (played by British actor Taylor James), of the tribe of Dan, would prove to be the last and most effective of the Judges.

By this time (c.1170 BC), the Hebrews had become serfs to the Philistines. They were so oppressive that

to this day the term 'philistine' is a byword for a brutal person. Their local enforcer, Prince Rallah (Jackson Rathbone, made up with an evil-looking goatee and black eyeliner), does not hesitate to kill any Hebrew who does not pay tribute to the king, Balek (Billy Zane, veteran of many bad-guy roles, including *Cal Hockley* in *Titanic*). These characters are not biblical. They are included in the movie for dramatic effect, to personalize the rivalry between Samson and the Philistines.

Samson was not an especially moral man. He has an eye for women and enjoys getting the better of people with his riddles. Yet, as his parents, Manoah (Rutger Hauer) and Zealphonis (Lindsay Wagner, a TV star in the 1970s) keep reminding their son, God has blessed him with an exceptional strength for the deliverance of Israel. This gift came with a condition, the so-called 'nazirite vow': that Samson should not drink wine, or cut his hair, or ever touch a dead body. Otherwise he should lose all his strength.

Samson's riddles

When King Balek hears of the remarkable Hebrew, he dispatches his son Rallah to entrap him. They send their strongest fighter into the land of Dan, laying wagers that no one could better him. Samson, of course, steps forward and easily defeats the prize-fighter; but then falls head-over-heels for his sister, Taren (Frances Sholto-Douglas) and soon proposes marriage.

Samson's parents urge him not to marry the Philistine beauty. On the other hand, Prince Rallah and his wife Delilah (Caitlin Leahy), see the potential in the match for subduing the Hebrew strongman. Samson himself is conflicted by his decision, and goes into the wilderness in search of a sign from God. There, in a poorly staged scene, he is attacked by a lion, which he easily defeats with his bare hands. Some time later, on passing that way, he finds honey in the lion's decomposing belly, which he takes as a sign of the nourishment that can be found in adversity:

"Out of the eater, something to eat;

Out of the strong, came what is sweet."

King Balek is played by Billy Zane, veteran of many bad-guy roles, including Cal Hockley in *Titanic*, while the lead role is played by British actor Taylor James

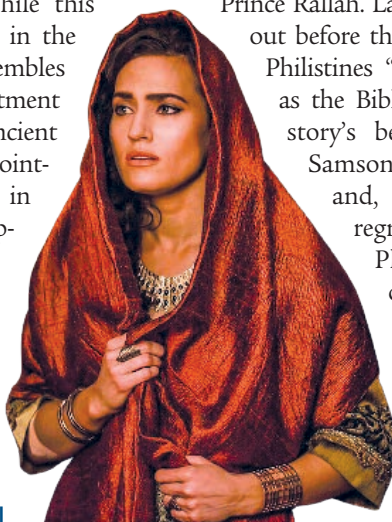
Samson decides to proceed with the marriage, which is hosted by the Philistines in the city of Timnah. There, Samson drinks wine, breaching his nazirite vow, and taunts Prince Rallah with a riddle. Rallah blackmails Taren into obtaining the meaning of the riddle from her husband.

Destiny and revenge

The conflict between Rallah and Samson is renewed. Samson kills 30 Philistine soldiers, looting their bodies, further compromising his nazirite vow. He goes on to vent his anger on the Philistines by having foxes drag burning torches through their cornfields. In revenge, Prince Rallah throws Taren and her family onto the fire. Stricken by grief and guilt, Samson retreats into the wilderness. There, Caleb (Greg Kriek), a brother who is not mentioned in the Bible, persuades him to confront Rallah. When Samson sees his father being martyred (another element not recorded in the Bible), his rage rises once again. Using a donkey's jawbone, he singlehandedly destroys Rallah's 1,000-strong army in a single day.

Following the rebellion, Samson returns to his home and is formally anointed as Judge. While this scene is not recounted in the Book of Judges, it resembles the ceremony of appointment for other leaders in ancient Israel. The symbol of anointing with oil is retained in our sacraments of Bap-

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tism, etc., albeit without the drenching that is depicted in the movie.

Delilah, the temptress

It is only at this point that the biblical story introduces us to the character of Delilah, whom Samson loves. Whereas the Bible describes her as a trickster and a temptress, the movie portrays Delilah in a sympathetic light, even if this characterization does not make sense in light of her final betrayal. The movie does accurately quote her most astute question: "How can you say you love me when you do not trust me?" (Judges 16:15). Samson's reply divulges the sole remaining secret to his exceptional strength, his uncut hair. Armed with this knowledge, Delilah cuts Samson's hair while he sleeps. In the Bible it is someone else who performs this task.

His third vow broken, his strength sapped, Samson is easily captured, then blinded and imprisoned by Prince Rallah. Later, he is brought out before the assembly of the Philistines "to amuse them," as the Bible tells us. In the story's best-known scene, Samson calls on God and, his hair having regrown, shakes the Philistine citadel until it falls, crushing all of Israel's enemies, as well as himself. His courage, the movie concludes, would be followed

two centuries later by David, who finally defeated the Philistines.

Pure Flix

Pure Flix is an independent film studio founded in 2005 in Arizona, USA, and is best known for the *God's not Dead* series, the third of which was released earlier this year. In contrast with the secular attitudes of most film producers, Pure Flix is proud of its evangelical, 'Bible belt' origins. The way this movie highlights Samson's personal conversion to God, for example, is typical of evangelical spirituality. So too is the movie's treatment of this part of the Bible as an historical fact, taking highly improbable events at face value.

It is surprising, then, that the movie takes such liberty with the Book of Judges, embellishing it with subplots that are not in the Bible, while omitting others, such as Samson's miraculous nativity. The finished product reminds me of the plot of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, with its persecuted hero (Samson), whose first love (Taren) was murdered, and who rebels against an evil prince (Rallah) who had usurped the throne of his father (Balek).

But this movie is no *Gladiator*. While the 1949 *Samson and Delilah* won Oscars for its set and costumes, this version certainly will not. The Holy Land looks far too neat to be real; the rocks like painted Styrofoam and the beards obviously fake. The acting is hammy and clichéd; the storyline of the movie was so disjointed that it had me reaching for my Bible. The book is better. ♦