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Abstract

Epic showman Cecil B. DeMille cofounded Hollywood and became a master of the American biblical epic who constructed his Judeo-Christian characters with great care; yet, his artistic efforts were frequently ignored, devalued, or dismissed. Thus, he is in need of reputation restoration alongside highlighting the pedagogic value of a pop culture approach to religion studies. Consequently, the critical literature was selectively reviewed and *Samson and Delilah* (1949) closely examined utilizing humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens to explicate the construction of Samson’s three lovers, namely: (1) Delilah (Hedy Lamarr), (2) Semadar (Angela Lansbury) and (3) Miriam (Olive Deering). It was concluded that DeMille was a far defter biblical filmmaker than hitherto appreciated. Further research into DeMille studies, biblical epics and the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film is highly warranted, warmly recommended and already long overdue.

Introduction


[^1]: Legendary
[^2]: Cecil B.
[^3]: DeMille’s
[^4]: Judges 13-16
Some scholars considered *Samson and Delilah* to be “DeMille’s grandest biblical epic” (Moses 1999, 411) and one of the iconographical depictions of the Old Testament in the twentieth century (Solomon 2001, 175) that has since stabilized into camp respectability amongst Western biblical scholars (Murphy 1999, 109-110). For example, J. Cheryl Exum (2002, 255) claimed that CB’s Technicolor testament was “a masterpiece of biblical film making (it gets better after repeated viewings); the 1949 film sparkles in spite of its age, with memorable dialogue and impressive overacting.” Her scholarly peer David Jasper (1999) similarly claimed:

In the Hollywood tradition of Old Testament epics…the cinema has occasionally contributed in a significant way to the history of biblical interpretations, perhaps unwittingly and most notably in the figure of Cecil B. De Mille in films like *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956)…[DeMille] re-reads the text of the Book of Judges midrashically as a love story which shifts the coherent and dehumanizing biblical perspective of Israel’s salvation history and replaces it with a *countercoherence* of a Delilah following her heart and remaining true to Samson… (p. 51).

Regrettably, despite the positive religious acclaim and the favorable commentaries from the delighted multitudes, many film critics were quick to ignore, dismiss, or devalue DeMille’s contributions to cinematic art claiming that he was disingenuous, inauthentic and an ineffectual storyteller. For example, Norman Bel Geddes argued:

Inspirationally and imaginatively, CB was sterile. His stories, situations and characters were, almost without exception, unintelligent, unintuitive, and psychologically adolescent. CB was a foreman in a movie factory; he fitted the parts together and demanded that they move as he thought they should. It was an early form of automation (quoted in Green 1997, 191-192).

Virginia W. Wexman (2006, 83) considered DeMille’s films to be “generally superficial and frequently meretricious…they added nothing to film art.” Peer director Preston Sturges thought that DeMille was “a thoroughly pedestrian director,” (Jacobs 1992, 180) whilst Gerald Mast (1981, 108) claimed that “DeMille’s films had everything but taste and intelligence.”

The writer resoundingly rejects these negative comments. DeMille was a far defter biblical filmmaker than has been realized, appreciated or honored to date. This is easily demonstrated by a critical examination of his character designs and their interrelated geometries, which were exceptionally detailed, multi-layered and harmoniously interlocked.
Thus, DeMille had creatively pushed his narrative and costuming specifications well beyond the traditional biblical formulations. Cecil also stayed faithful to his lay preacher aspirations. As he claimed near the end of his life: “my ministry was making religious movies and getting more people to read the Bible than anyone else ever has” (Orrison 1999, 108). Therefore, throughout his career, whenever the paying public, Paramount bosses and hard-nosed financiers would let him, he creatively fused religion with popular culture to make the Bible exciting, understandable and relevant to the proverbial children-of-the-media during the (still-continuing) reign of moving image culture. His biblical spectacles not only embodied mainstream scriptural norms, ideas and prescriptions, but as the “most representative art form of the twentieth century” (Bywater and Sobchack 1989, 78), film provided a very desirable medium through which the sometimes arcane meanings of religion could be easily communicated to the masses, whether locally, nationally or internationally.

Because of Samson and Delilah’s historical significance, religious importance, popular impact, scant scholarly attention devoted to it, and its pedagogic under-utilization within the classroom, home and pulpit, the time is right to redress these deficiencies and reveal some of those many construction secrets deftly hidden within this ancient tale of love and betrayal, revenge and death, loss and redemption. And especially since this regrettable lack of appreciation helped warp DeMille’s professional reputation, deflected serious academic attention away from his extensive cinematic oeuvre, devalued his rightful place within American film history, and ironically helped turning him into Hollywood’s best-known unknown. Furthermore, DeMille deserves to be brought to the forefront of biblical film scholarship because of the immense breadth, depth and range of aesthetic accomplishments, which are only slowly being revealed today (e.g., Exum 1996; Kozlovic 2002, 2003, 2006). This effort is in addition to his seminal contributions to the classical narrative style, gender stereotyping and the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film (a.k.a sacred cinema, spiritual cinema, holy film, cinematic theology, cinematheology, theo-film, celluloid religion, film-and-faith, film-faith dialogue).

For the purposes of this paper, the critical DeMille, film and religion literature was selectively reviewed and integrated into the text to enhance narrative coherence (albeit, with a strong reportage flavor). This was followed by a close examination of The Book of Judges 13-16 and DeMille’s Samson and Delilah utilizing humanist film criticism as the guiding...
analytical lens (i.e., examining the textual world inside the frame, but not the world outside the frame—see Bywater and Sobchack 1989, chapter 2). Part of the secret of DeMille’s trademark artistry that made him the “undisputed master of the genre” (Llewellyn-Jones 2005, 14) was the in-depth construction of his biblical characters. Therefore, the specific research focus herein will be upon Samson’s (Victor Mature’s) three lovers, namely: (1) Delilah (Hedy Lamarr), (2) Semadar (Angela Lansbury) and (3) Miriam (Olive Deering).

Two of these women were scripturally based and the other was a fictional but plausible scriptural extrapolation. One woman was “bad”, one was “good”, and the third was “good” but turned “bad”. Two betrayed Samson and one defended him. One was a definite ethnic foreigner, one was considered an ethnic foreigner but possibly a kinswoman, and the third was definitely a kinswoman. Two were erotic women and the third a virginal plain Jane. Two died horribly and the third survived devastation but was left a life of heartache, sorrow and regret. All three women loved Samson, with Samson only loving two of them and honoring the third. The following is a brief deconstructive explication of these three lovers to reveal how they were deftly constructed, dramatically engaging and scripturally insightful.

1. Delilah: The Archetypal “Bad Girl”

DeMille’s Delilah grew from a young, ignored, slim, unmarried, willful, quick-witted and possessive man-eating girl into a coldly calculating, controlling, independent, regal, erotic, much ogled and opulently dressed courtesan of the Saran of Gaza (George Sanders), that is, the culturally notorious seductive sorceress of Sorek (Judg. 16:4). Although there are no physical descriptions of Delilah within the Bible, she is traditionally imagined to be a ravishingly beautiful femme fatale, a biblical babe befitting her biography as “Samson’s lover-betrayer” (Pressler 2002, 222). DeMille chose Hedy Lamarr to play Delilah because this equally notorious Austrian actor “epitomized the Continental exotic to a generation of moviegoing audiences [i.e., the seductive foreign “other”]. As Dorothy Kilgallen would write in 1952, “Hedy Lamarr became this generation’s version of the Vamp – a synonym for the woman who launches ships, wrecks homes and sends countless men to glory or to doom,” (Negra 2001, 103) just like the biblical Delilah did to her ancient nemesis, Samson, the last and most famous of the twelve judges of Israel (i.e., the charismatic leaders of YHWH).

Lamarr, DeMille’s “prefabricated sex symbol” (Negra 2001, 104) was also known as “the Ecstasy Girl” because of her starring role in the suppressed pornographic film of her
teens, enticingly entitled *Ecstasy*, which DeMille-the-PR-man quickly capitalized upon for marketing and character construction reasons (Kozlovic 2002). Lamarr thus became DeMille’s icon of obsessive eroticism, with journalist Phillip Lopate (1987, 91) viewing her as “the epitome of sluttish perfidy.” Consequently, DeMille’s Delilah costuming suggested absolutely nothing about motherhood, babies, domesticity, kitchens, cooking or housework so as to jibe with her scriptural function as Samson’s paramour and her own personal aura of eroticism. As her *Samson and Delilah* co-star George Sanders said of Lamarr, she “was so beautiful that everybody would stop talking when she came into a room. Wherever she went she was the cynosure of all eyes…when she spoke one did not listen, one just watched her mouth moving and marvelled at the exquisite shapes made by her lips” (Sanders 1960, 111-112).

Furthermore, DeMille-the-cinematic-lay-preacher was also being scripturally authentic since the Samson saga “heavily implies that Delilah is the complete antithesis of the perfect Israelite wife” (Smith 1997, 52), especially in her popularly perceived role as “the quintessential deceptive seductress” (Pressler 2002, 222). As novelist Fay Weldon (1995, 80) cheekily imagined Delilah saying: “You live to find out that the thing most likely to put a man off his stroke is his mother, and that’s always worth knowing!” Indeed, DeMille had dramatically re-enacted this very same understanding when his Miriam visited Samson at Delilah’s oasis love-nest to tell him about his tortured mother. And Samson immediately stopped romancing Delilah to rescue her, much to Delilah’s chagrin and subsequent nefarious machinations.

**Samson, Sex, and Maternity**

For Phillip Lopate (1987, 88), Samson’s ultimate downfall is rooted in Delilah-the-non-mother’s motherly actions because according to his reading of Scripture: “She places his [Samson’s] head in her lap, that maternal gesture. He is finally “unmanned” by surrendering to his need for mothering.” Other biblical scholars considered this Samson-Delilah contact to be a veiled metaphoric reference to oral sex (Crenshaw 1978, 115) followed by deep post-coital recuperation, especially considering that the biblical Samson was a philandering judge who enjoyed harlots (Judg. 16:1).[5] And particularly when the biblical word “lap” (Judg. 16:19 NIV, NRSV, Moffatt) has been translated in other versions of the Bible as “knees” (Judg. 16:19 KJV, NAS, Knox), thus making the scriptural passage read: “she made him sleep...
upon her knees” (Judg. 16:19), that is, one variant of the missionary position (i.e., face-to-face or knee-over-knee sex). This erotic interpretation of Scripture is just as plausible, if not more so given Delilah’s famous reputation as “a witch, a bitch, a termagant, a whore” (Wurtzel 1998, 47). Furthermore, for biblical scholar Susan Ackerman (2000, 39), reference to Samson’s head upon Delilah are metaphoric “intimations not of prostitution but of motherhood and the womb: Samson lies shorn between Delilah’s knees in the same way he lay as a newborn, bald, between his mother’s [knees].” Once again, it is the mother-like actions of Delilah-the-sexy-non-mother that facilitated Samson’s ultimate demise.

Overall, the scriptural “Delilah…is not destined to become a mother because that is not her purpose” (Leneman 2000, 147), rather, her purpose is to be alluring human bait and extract the secret of Samson’s strength via her various enticement strategies (Judg. 16:5). And presumably including Delilah’s subtextual, maternally-linked eroticism as one of “the fleshpots of my enemies” according to DeMille’s Samson, and which ultimately led to Samson’s betrayal, capture, binding, blinding, humiliation, torture and spectacular suicidal death under Dagon’s collapsed temple. Fay Weldon (1995, 79) defiantly suggested that: “Samson becomes the archetype for male fear of women – though personally I think he just didn’t want his hair cut because his mother told him not to.”

Similarly, Phillip Lopate (1987, 88) considered that Samson’s need for mothering “is at the heart of fear of Woman: that she will touch him in that sore place and open up his bottomless need for mother-love, which he thought he had outgrown.” Somewhat ironically, it is Delilah’s persistent nagging, the stereotypic tool and tactic of mothers worldwide that eventually wins the day over Samson (Judg. 16:16-17), not eroticism as is popularly presumed. Yet, Delilah is known throughout the ages as a lying seducer who used manipulative sex to ruin a “good” man, whereas she was upfront from the start and did not lie to Samson (Judg. 16:6). In fact, Samson lied to her, and did it three times in a row (Judg. 16:7, 11, 13). So Delilah should have been called the Queen of the Naggers for annoying Samson to the point “that his soul was vexed unto death” (Judg. 16:16), thus inducing him to reveal the secret of his phenomenal strength (i.e., uncut hair—Judg. 16:17). Typically, DeMille-the-pop-culture-professional, DeMille-the-salacious-cineaste and DeMille-the-harmonizer had his Delilah employ nagging and eroticism to achieve her on-screen ends (i.e., the convincingly creative fusion of biblical fact, popular fantasy and audience expectation).
Delilah’s Displaced Domesticity

During scriptwriting conferences, DeMille imagined his Delilah accepting her Samson-snaring mission for the lords of the Philistines (Judg. 16:5) and eagerly saying to them: “Boy, will I! I’ll bring this bastard in with a ring through his nose. I’ll lead him!” (Koury 1959, 218). Indeed, this was another good DeMillean use for the unscriptural (if highly plausible) character of Hisham (Julia Faye), Delilah’s aging personal servant, who acted as a character repository for Delilah’s domestic attributes displaced onto her, as well as being a symbolic representative of the Philistine nation who lorded it over the Danites (Judg. 13:1). The mature Delilah was rich, powerful, independent and a politically well-connected woman who had the Philistine leadership coming to her and, unprompted, offering her a fantastic amount of money to do their dirty work (Judg. 16:5) when their masculine force-of-arms approach failed miserably (Judg. 15:8, 14).

Therefore, it make sense that she would have had domestic servants in her household, even if the biblical account overlooked this most obvious mundane fact. As a biblical filmmaker who had to make explicit what may only have been implicit within Holy Scripture, DeMille-the-harmonizing-pragmatist could not ignore these pertinent domestic facts, and so his best filmmaking compromise was to accommodate both realities by having just one major Philistine servant, Hisham. Plot-wise, DeMille also engineered this un-crowded reality by having his Delilah dismiss her caravan escort before she reached the oasis love-nest, and then later by having Hisham inform Delilah that Samson had scared away her animal attendants when the miffed Delilah wanted to leave the oasis campsite for her home in Gaza.

Old Hisham was also the repository of the stereotypic, but traditionally attributed feminine habit of gossiping. Hisham did this when she repeated Samson’s “forked-tongue” slander about Delilah to her devastated mistress as she watched her home burn down and was contemplating her own uncertain future. This gossip incident also mirrored Delilah’s own tittle-tattle behavior when she had previously informed her father Tubal (William Farnum) about Samson’s “alley cats” slander concerning Semadar. Even during Samson and Semadar’s wedding feast, the impetuous Delilah, who was supposed to be a dutiful host, rejected the gracious host-servant role. When she later “entertained” the Philistine wedding guests at Tubal’s fatherly urging, she offered them no domestic service at all; in fact, she sat down, ate food and deliberately tasted honey in front of them rather than formally offer food...
to them as a good host would. Why this grossly ungracious, non-serving behavior? Simply because Delilah is incompatible with domesticity, in addition to strategic scheming being a part of her game-plan to sow discord amongst the wedding guests, dislodge Semadar as Samson’s bride-to-be, and then snare Samson for herself (not scripturally stated but great confrontational romantic drama).

During scriptwriting conferences, DeMille envisioned his Delilah being “quite a bitch” and a “scheming little dame” (Koury 1959, 214), attitudes which reflected the popular belief about Delilah in DeMille’s day and our own. Delilah’s lustful love for Samson was certainly intense, urgent and possessive as befitting her spoiled teenager-like behavior. As she passionately told Samson at the wedding feast: “You’re the only thing in the world I want!” Later, at the oasis love-nest, the now world-wise Delilah jealously told her romantic rival Miriam: “I love him as a man of flesh and blood!” and as she cunningly warned Samson: “I’m the weakness, the love that would enslave you.” In a moment of weakness, she also confessed to Samson: “You’re all I want” thus mirroring her former youthful possessiveness and reminding the audience of her still continuing emotional motivation.

DeMille also reinforced Delilah’s non-domesticity trait by indirectly comparing her to Samson’s mother, Hazeleponit (pronounced on-screen as “Hazel…” but hereafter reproduced as “Hazel”), who was played by mother specialization actor, Fay Holden (Kozlovic 2006). In particular, he provided this contrasting comparison via bodily displacements. For example, Samson had physically lifted his mother up towards the sky and onto some imaginary pedestal in her domestically infused rustic household in the context of her excessive, “good” woman motherliness (thus physically symbolizing her closer-to-heaven status). This bodily act, which itself reinforced the image of Samson as the strongest man in the world was accompanied by his adoring gaze topped off with an affectionate kiss and the resultant emotional sigh from his appreciative mother, quickly followed by more motherly nagging!

Conversely, Samson used non-affectionate body contact when he contemptuously grabbed Delilah and threw her down onto the bed-floor in her oasis love-nest tent in the context of her wanton “bad” woman sexual allure (thus physically symbolizing her closer-to-Hell status), coupled with an aggressive Samson gaze and contemptuous comments. The cunning Delilah then confirmed her erotic trap by perceptively saying to him: “Do you know a better bait Samson? Men always respond.” And then to prove this pivotal point, the

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subsequently seduced Samson playfully called Delilah a “daughter of Hell” just before passionately kissing her and confirming her evil, erotic nature (and demonstrating Samson’s famous weakness for “bad girls”). Indeed, the scriptural Delilah is the very next woman that Samson is involved with straight after the harlot of Gaza incident (Judges 16:1), and so it thematically suggested that Delilah was just another harlot conquest (i.e., erotic reputation by close narrative association), but one that Samson fell in love with (Judg. 16:4). Thus making *Samson and Delilah* a filmic precursor of the contemporary romance *Pretty Woman* wherein Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) falls for his hooker-escort, Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts).

**Delilah as Feminist Hero, Survivor and Avenger**

DeMille constructed his Delilah as a small, strong-willed, fiercely independent woman who freely confessed “I have no husband” and then more firmly said “I have no master” whilst Samson leisurely ransacked her tent at the oasis love-nest site. Furthermore, Delilah was a Philistine[7] hero who had defeated the preternaturally strongest man on Earth through ordinary feminine wiles. As the Saran of Gaza told Miriam about Delilah’s conquering of Samson: “He was not captured by force of arms, but their softness,” thus leaving Samson bewitched, bothered and bewildered. DeMille’s staffer, Phil Koury (1959, 199) objected to this filmic fact claiming that: “She thus eliminates a Jewish hero who has been a stumbling block to Philistine supremacy, a solution satisfactory to DeMille if not to Bible scholars.” Yet, this is exactly what Delilah does do from a strict biblical perspective. It was Delilah who extracted Samson’s secret, relayed it to the Philistine lords and got his hair cut which directly led to his weakness, capture, blindness, imprisonment and eventual death under Dagon’s toppled temple (Judg. 16)!

Delilah was certainly a patriotic hero from the Philistine perspective, which many feminist scholars acknowledge and almost celebrate. For example, Mieke Bal (1987) claimed that she:

…could be considered a prototype of the socially successful, independent woman. Her bargain with the chieftains [“the lords of the Philistines” - Judg. 16:5] then looks more like a business transaction than a low betrayal. In wartime, and it is such a time, no blame is attached to patriotism. Delilah just uses her specific potential for helping her tribe and makes enough money out of it to preserve her financial independence (51).
Her scholarly peer Lillian Klein (1993b, 65) similarly claimed that: “Delilah cannot be faulted for serving her people” and especially considering that Delilah was “possibly a heroine to her own people” (66). Furthermore, as Susan Ackerman (2000) pointed out:

In Cecil B. De Mille’s film “Samson and Delilah,” the last words Samson (Victor Mature) speaks to Delilah (Hedy Lamarr) before he is blinded by the Philistines are, “The name Delilah will be an everlasting curse upon the lips of men.”…this ennobled depiction of Samson and his everlasting curse of Delilah is all a matter of perspective. If Judges had been written by a Philistine, it might well be Delilah who would bear the epithet otherwise given to Jael in Judg. 5:24, “most blessed of women” (41).

Indeed, Delilah’s patriotic Philistine behavior is further justified when considering Samson’s escalating personal vendettas against the Philistines involving death and wanton destruction (Judg. 15:4-5, 8). Samson’s rogue behavior as the “Che Guevara of the Sinai Peninsula” (Wurtzel 1998, 47) who “seeks to win by violence and revenge” (Wicker 2003, 47) instead of prayer and judicious good deeds as befitting an emissary of God (Judg. 13:5) quickly turned him into a major threat to the local peace, Philistine national security and Israelite stability as a happily subdued nation (Judg. 15:11).

Alternately, Delilah’s betrayal of Samson was interpreted as Philistine heroism spurned on by a strong self-survival motive. As Gail Corrington Streete (1997, 55) suggested: “Delilah may well be trying…to make the wisest choices she can for her own survival,” especially given the power, authority and wealth of the lords of the Philistines who had tasked her with their secret-capturing mission (Judg. 16:5). Carolyn Pressler (2002, 222-223) also suggested that Delilah’s behavior was a personal act of self-survival because: “The story places the Delilah episode after the murder of the Timnite woman [DeMille’s Semadar]. Perhaps Delilah knew that what happened to her predecessor could also happen to her.” For Alice Ogden Bellis (1994, 126), Delilah’s betrayal of Samson was “explainable not only as patriotic but also retributive justice. Samson’s behavior in Timnath had resulted in the fiery death of an innocent woman [DeMille’s Semadar] and her family [DeMille’s Tubal and servants plus wedding guests]. If Delilah was aware of this, then she might well have been eager to see this criminal [Samson] brought to justice.”

Yet, scripturally speaking, Samson is not considered a criminal or even a holy vandal, but rather, he is seen as a Christian hero (a.k.a Heb. 11:32-40), and even if Delilah was
appalled at Samson-the-Philistine-criminal, there is no scriptural indication of this fact. Indeed, the lords of the Philistines do not directly threaten Delilah physically, psychologically or financially, nor do they evoke Philistine patriotism as a potential reason for her “forced” compliance of their secret-extracting mission. Therefore, it appears that Delilah was definitely not a woman to be threatened, toyed with, cheated or betrayed. After all, this biblical “bad girl” did have a personal name proudly recorded in Holy Writ (and where naming indicates importance), unlike many other biblical women who were notable but nameless (e.g., Samson’s own mother and Timnath wife-to-be).

Furthermore, Delilah was financially rewarded after her Philistine mission was accomplished (Judg. 16:18), that is, she was not killed, short-changed or cheated out of her legitimate earnings, despite being physically weaker as a woman and with no obvious husband, or military, political and religious support, or any other powers to back her up if double-crossed. Once again, DeMille was an insightful lay biblical scholar ahead of his time regarding this particular feminist hero point, and who also paid his on-screen debt to Delilah in a delightful display of ostentatious wealth and feminine superiority.

**Delilah, Derision, and Death**

DeMille also liked to have it both ways in continuance of his auteur penchant for harmonizing divergent scriptural interpretations. Therefore, like the Hebrew narrator of the Bible who had invited the “reader to scorn Delilah because she uses Samson’s love to get what she wants from him” (Klein 1993b, 63), DeMille invited his audiences to cast similar derision upon Delilah via an angry Samson who labeled her a “Philistine gutter rat” and venomously claimed that “the name Delilah will be an everlasting curse upon the lips of men.” Later, DeMille had his emotionally suffering Delilah pray to Samson’s God for help (but not to Dagon or any other Philistine deity), then regretting her treacherous betrayer behavior followed by throwing herself upon Samson’s mercy (physically, emotionally, spiritually), particularly inside the prison gristmill when the blind-and-chained Samson grabbed her, lifted her high into the air and could have easily dashed her to death, but did not.

At film’s end, Delilah publicly abandoned the Saran of Gaza (symbolically the Philistines) for Samson and his invisible God (YHWH and the Danites/Israelites/Hebrews, except Miriam, her rival for Samson’s love) via another DeMille engineered act of bodily displacements to physically enact the same ideas. Delilah gets up from the raised and honored

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throne beside the seated Saran in Dagon’s temple and walks over to the suffering Samson standing in the courtyard below. DeMille-the-Christian-apologist thus made Delilah a de facto Israelite believer in the passionate penitent mould of Mary Magdalene (another tainted woman who changed her sinner ways following a holy man and thus redeemed herself), which also thematically supported DeMille’s subtextual construction of Samson as a rustic Christ-figure (Kozlovic 2003).

Delilah’s crushing death alongside Samson and the sporting Philistine crowd inside Dagon’s toppled temple meant that their lover relationship was stymied as they joined the diaspora of the dead, but even this non-scriptural DeMillean ending of Delilah was not inconsistent with the theological trajectory of the biblical Samson saga. Why? Because “Samson’s love for Delilah never has a chance to find a full response, for she is but an instrument in a game in which God had something to prove” (Sasson 1988, 335), and as the Hebrew narrator wrote regarding Samson’s puzzling Timnath wife choice: “But his father and his mother knew not that it was of the Lord, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines” (Judg. 14:4) [my emphasis]. That is, God is a cosmic troublemaker who deliberately stirred up inter-ethnic discord and used Samson, the Timnath woman (DeMille’s Semadar), and now Delilah to do it (i.e., all are holy patsies)! For Phillip Lopate (1987, 77), God’s duplicitous role was also a good “cosmic alibi” for Samson’s less chivalrous “skirt-chasing…whoring and womanizing” ways (a.k.a Judg. 16:1).

Scripturally speaking, the Bible is silent about Delilah’s death, let alone dying alongside Samson in Dagon’s temple; she merely suffers a textual death after Judges 16:20 (i.e., never mentioned again). Yet, many religious scholars are willing to concede that her death in Dagon’s temple was a distinct logical possibility, even if scripturally unreported. For example, “3,000 Philistines, including the treacherous Delilah perished” (Lockyer 1967, 44), “Delilah, no doubt, among them” (Guthridge 1995, 23). “Probably even Delilah was there, for how could they celebrate such an enormous feast without their heroine?” (Karssen 1991, 104) and “through which she probably lost her life” (Karssen 1991, 105). In summation, DeMille’s Delilah was an obsessive, erotic, “bad girl”, a Philistine tomboy-cum-courtesan, Samson’s scriptural lover and his ethnic, political and religious nemesis in the best traditions of good-versus-evil confrontational drama that put bums on seats and delivered him box-office gold.
2. Semadar: The Archetypal “Good Girl” Turned “Bad”

Semadar was DeMille’s on-screen name for Samson’s biblically unnamed Philistine wife-to-be from Timnath (Judg. 14:1-2), and whom the Bible only referred to as “a woman” (Judg. 14:1, 2, 3), “the woman” (Judg. 14:7, 10), “a wife” (Judg. 14:3), “his [Samson’s] wife” (Judg. 15:1, 6), “my [Samson’s] wife” (Judg. 15:1) and “Samson’s wife” (Judg. 14:15, 16, 20). Metaphorically speaking, she was also referred to in the phrase: “If ye had not plowed with my [Samson’s] heifer” (Judg. 14:18), an ancient erotic reference, but of severely diminished shock value today. She was not worthy of a personal name (unlike Delilah), only a gender designation (woman) and a social role (wife). Nevertheless, DeMille empowered her by giving her a name, and presumably to avoid awkward dialogue complications, given her extensive on-screen time (especially compared to Samson’s mother Hazel). Indeed, as feminist biblical scholar Mieke Bal (1999) argued: “A name makes them into subjects, that makes them speakable” and so Bal personally named this unnamed Timnath woman: …Kallah. The word means “bride,” but I wish it to be a pun on kalah, which means “consumption,” “complete destruction.” And indeed, the destruction of her is complete, both physical and symbolical. She is consumed by fire, and her remembrance is overshadowed by that of Delilah. The one who destroyed Samson’s heroic strength is remembered, not the one who is its victim. Naming these women, then, is a first gesture to counter their oblivion (319).

Therefore, DeMille had again acted as an insightful lay biblical scholar by countering her feminine oblivion well before his time, place, or stereotypic gender disposition. Alternately, mainstream biblical scholarship is finally using the tactics of cinematic theology, narrative countercoherence and the hermeneutic of creative imagination inspired by DeMille to good practical effect, as documented by David Jasper (1999), Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (2001) and their academic ilk.

Fay Holden’s motherly characterization of Hazel also contrasted strongly with Angela Lansbury’s Semadar, that is, DeMille’s young, beautiful, slim, opulent bride-to-be, and whose warrior-woman accoutrements (e.g., hunter’s spear, lion target and chariot) strongly suggested a lack of babies, cooking and housework. However, her future domesticity was assured following her planned wedding to the rustic Samson, whom DeMille constructed as a Danite shepherd for subtextual purposes (Kozlovic 2003). Samson does not physically put Semadar high upon an imaginary pedestal like he did to his mother, Hazel, nor does he throw Semadar
down onto the floor as he did to the devilish Delilah. If anything, Semadar is frequently depicted as his eye-to-eye equal whether: (a) walking in Tubal’s garden with Samson, or (b) seated at her wedding feast alongside Samson and Ahtur (Henry Wilcoxon), or (c) when Samson listened to her crying as she emotionally manipulated him to get the lion-and-honey answer to his enigmatic riddle given to his adversarial Philistine wedding guests, or (d) even at her death when she is pinned to the wall by a Philistine spear and Samson lovingly holds her and vows revenge. DeMille was once again deftly encoding interpersonal relationship through bodily displacements on-screen.

**Semadar as the Embodiment of Fickleness, Not Fragility**

Semadar eventually proved to be fearful, fickle and treacherous, “a bit of a scheming dame” (Koury 1959, 214) who had “double-crossed” (Koury 1959, 215) Samson according to DeMille’s scriptwriting conceptions of her. In effect, she was a weaker dramatic precursor of Delilah, or as Scripture scholar Lillian Klein (1993a, 24) put it: “Samson’s almost-wife, is a passive version of Delilah.” DeMille certainly portrayed Semadar as less desperate in securing her romantic wants from Samson, and those efforts were also less devastating in both effect and affect. She was certainly not fragile (as indicated by her warrior-woman ways), but she became the victim of male violence when killed by a rogue Philistine spear according to DeMille, and then burnt to ashes in her fire-consumed home; just as she was quickly disposed of in the Scriptures having suffered both a burning and a textual death (Judg. 15:6). As Mieke Bal (1999, 318) succinctly described her marginal status, she was: “Married, but not really, a virgin but not really, killed not by but with her father...[she was] a lover of her indirect killer [Samson].”

Neither DeMille’s nor the scriptural Samson were happy about this deadly outcome for their lost Philistine wife-to-be, however, both the on-screen and the scriptural Samson learnt not to be emotionally blackmailned by claims of love next time around. How so? Because Samson’s subsequent lover Delilah did not get Samson’s strength secret through manipulative sex or the emotional resort to claims of love, but rather, through the power of persistent nagging (Judg. 16:16). Frustration not fraternizing won the day. In short, DeMille’s Semadar was an alluring, fickle Philistine playgirl, a warrior-woman wannabe, a “good girl”-turned-”bad” as Samson’s traitorous wife-to-be, and thus an important transitional character between the devilish Delilah and the angelic Miriam.
3. Miriam: The Archetypal “Good Girl”

DeMille’s Miriam is scripturally unspecified and thus biblically unnamed, but a plausible screen character nonetheless whose very existence is indicated by the palpable concern of Samson’s parents over their son’s dubious decision to marry “a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines” (Judg. 14:1). As they worriedly complained to Samson about his intended violation of their endogamy traditions: “Is there never a woman amongst the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines?” (Judg. 14:3). DeMille’s fictional Miriam is in effect a scriptural extrapolation representing one of these unnamed but rejected daughters of Samson’s brethren, religion, and ethnicity. DeMille also honored this woman by giving her a personal name, and presumably, to again avoid awkward dialogue complications given her extensive on-screen time and wannabe lover status.

Miriam was designed by DeMille to be young, slim, a plain Jane beauty, virginal, patient, caring and a good homebody, who displayed spiritual love (i.e., a precursory image of Samson’s idealized mother, Hazel, before the physical attributes of aging and motherliness overtook her). Miriam was certainly constructed as an archetypal “good girl” whom DeMille had envisioned during scriptwriting conferences as a “sweet little girl from Samson’s own village,” “a great saint” and a “Virgin Mary”-figure (Koury 1959, 231). Samson and Delilah’s scriptwriter Jesse L. Lasky Jr. (1973) described her as:

…the home-town-girl-next-door, the honest Hebrew maiden that Samson should have married. She had to look what any Jewish mother would choose for her son, practical, religious, unglamorous and marvellous about the house. Miriam, the good girl, marriage with whom would have deprived the Bible of its most spectacular love story (221-222).

In accordance with DeMille’s casting penchant for ethnic verisimilitude, DeMille wanted not just a Jew to play the part of the Danite/Israelite/Hebrew Miriam, but a “Jewish Jewess” (Lasky Jr. 1973, 222), therefore, on the personal recommendation of Lasky Jr., Olive Deering was chosen by DeMille. Why? Because she was formally trained in Jewish Theatre and got the role because Lasky Jr. had assured DeMille that: “She’s a walking synagogue…Rebecca at the well [a.k.a Gen. 24:13-20]!” Indeed, a watery setting is exactly where the audience first meets Miriam, namely, at the Zorah village well filling pitchers of water alongside a little girl who specifically referred to her container as a “pitcher” (but not…

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“jar,” “jug,” “vessel” etc.). This is in accordance with Genesis 24:16: “And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her: and she went down to the well, and filled her pitcher, and came up” [my emphasis]. DeMille’s attention to biblical minutiae is legendary! Not surprisingly, DeMille-the-producer also hired Olive Deering to play another Miriam working near a water well within his second The Ten Commandments so as to continue this watery thematic for both auteur and inter-Testament consistency reasons.

**Miriam as the Embodiment of Fragility, Not Fickleness**

DeMille’s Samson semi-mockingly referred to Miriam as an “angel” when replying to his mother’s glowing reports of her during their loving kitchen conversation. And directly to this “angel” herself Samson said: “Miriam…you’re like a sparrow so gentle” and presumably, although unstated, common and weak because in the [Christian] Bible a sparrow was not worth very much: “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing?” (Matt. 10:29) and “Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings” (Luke 12:6). In fact, DeMille reinforced the notion of a sparrow’s intrinsic weakness during the oasis love-nest scene when Delilah bound Samson with the scripturally specified “seven green withes” (Judg. 16:7) only to have him playfully respond: “That knot there wouldn’t…that wouldn’t even hold a sparrow. Tie it double.”

Was DeMille’s choice of the word “sparrow” subtly suggesting that good/weak girls are not very exciting and never have any fun? Apparently so, because the darker-haired Miriam never has any romantic fun, let alone sexual adventures in the film. And like a true “good girl”, she quickly rejected the possibility of Philistine dalliances when one of the thuggish soldiers menacingly approached her at the Zorah water well stating that she was “a jug of Danite wine we haven’t tasted.” This in itself verbally tagged Miriam as both desirable and a “good girl” by virtue of her unmolested, non-fickle, non-fraternizing, non-collaborator behavior with the enemy Philistines.

Furthermore, DeMille’s dialogic reference to a “sparrow” was astute for a second time because these birds are also mentioned in the Bible in the context of someone seeking a familial home: “Yea, the sparrow hath found an house…where she may lay her young” (Psa. 84:3) and which is also linked to loneliness: “I…am as a sparrow alone upon the house top” (Psa 102:7). Tragically, Miriam-the-wannabe-lover lost her opportunity to have a household with Samson and ended up alone pining for her unrequited love after his devastating death at film’s end under Dagon’s toppled temple. She left the scene of death and destruction heart-
broken and emotionally shell-shocked to stoically face an uncertain future full of sorrow, regret, and painful memories.

**Miriam as the Embodiment of Innocence and Threat**

The implied sexual threat to the virginal Miriam by the bully boy Philistine soldier at the village water well not only suggested her nubile beauty, but more significantly, the Philistine’s whoring ways. The salaciousness of the Philistines was also indicated when Samson lost the riddle wager at his wedding feast and one taunting Philistine guest demanded: “bring me an embroidered robe to dazzle the wenches.” Later, when Samson returned and honored his lost wager, he contemptuously threw him the garment saying: “Here Teresh, wear this over your head so the wenches can’t see your face.” The word “wench” is an archaic name for “a prostitute” or “to frequent the company of prostitutes” for promiscuous sex (Hanks et al. 1982, 1646). On-screen, Miriam was no Danite wench, and even off-screen she “moved through the Hollywood sets like a daughter of Dan” (Lasky Jr. 1973, 224).

Furthermore, a Philistine tax collector doing his duty referred to Miriam as “big eyes” thereby dialogically reinforcing her angelic, child-like innocence. Even Delilah at the oasis love-nest called Miriam “a milk-faced girl with a cow’s eyes” thereby reinforcing her girlish, virginal qualities. Then Delilah manipulatively admitted to Samson: “You belong to Miriam, she’s the good in you.” The binary contrast between these two women was deep, vivid, and deliberate. DeMille described their relationship as follows: “Miriam and Delilah. The fight between good love and bad love…the great courtesan and the great saint…Delilah and the Virgin Mary together” (Koury 1959, 231).

After Samson’s betrayal and capture by the Philistine soldiers, Delilah emphasized her sexual jealousy by triumphantly claiming to him: “Your little Danite sparrow will nest alone!” Therefore, Delilah also saw Miriam as common and weak with nest-building desires compared to her own opulence, power and personal possessiveness; even if Miriam was an outstanding person within the Danite community, especially in the eyes of Samson’s mother who extolled her wifely virtues (and potential daughter-in-law desirability) in-line with Israelite endogamy traditions.

Delilah also referred to Miriam as a “milk-faced Danite lily,” which at least implied that she thought Miriam was beautiful enough to be a sexual threat to her, especially considering that the Bible links lilies to sweetness, for example: “his lips like lilies, dropping sweet...
smelling myrrh” (Song Sol. 5:13). Therefore, as a DeMille specified “Danite lily,” Miriam-the-Danite was correctly labeled because that dialogue description also resonated geographically with the Bible. How so? Because the “lilies of the scriptural record were to be found in the low plain, among thorny weeds, and in pastures where flocks and gazelles grazed” (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania/International Bible Students Association 1988, 255). That is, the geography of the Israelite’s land, and thus symbolic of Miriam’s lowly status (personally and nationally), amongst a sea of prickly trouble (the oppressive Philistines and the colluding Judahtes [Jews] wanting to hand over Samson to their Philistine enemy—Judg. 15:10-13), and in accordance with DeMille’s non-scriptural vocational prescription of Samson as a shepherd (Kozlovic 2003).

Miriam was designed by DeMille as a common, good and beautiful young girl who was not sexually active or erotically alluring, financially rich or politically powerful, mysterious or romantically dangerous. Instead, he emphasized her gentleness, spiritual beauty, and personal courage without any hint of Delilah-like treachery or Semadar-like fickleness; just as DeMille-the-auteur did with Sephora (Yvonne De Carlo) compared to Nefretiri (Anne Baxter) within his 1956 The Ten Commandments. Indeed, DeMille deliberately emphasized Miriam’s domestic traits as much as he did Hazel’s domestic traits to cement their equivalence as “good” marriageable women and Israelite equals. In effect, Miriam is essentially Hazel-lite.

Miriam as the Mirror of Hazel

Hazel, as Samson’s mother and Manoah’s wife, strongly stressed Miriam’s admirable domestic qualities to a romantically disinterested Samson by sincerely saying to him: “From morning to night Miriam’s hands are never idle, no cross words ever pass her lips.” Even children liked Miriam and freely approached her or were located in her general vicinity. For example, a cute little girl at the village water well said: “May I fill my pitcher Miriam?” and she caringly replied: “We’ll fill it together little Samaritan.” Later, she restrained the angered child-warrior, Saul (Russell Tamblyn), who is unflinchingly hostile towards the Philistines (the subjugating power controlling God’s covenant people), and meant to do them damage with his sling (itself mirroring Samson’s anti-Philistine aggressiveness). However, Miriam-the-peacemaker cried out: “No Saul! No!…You’ll bring death to the village…Samson is our warrior” (which is exactly what did happen later when Samson’s anger-turned-revenge was not restrained).

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Young Saul also accompanied Miriam to see Samson at Delilah’s oasis love-nest, he accompanied her to Dagon’s temple, and he is with her at film’s end questioning Samson’s demise. These Miriam-focused incidents were de facto mother-and-child scenes that strongly resonated with Miriam’s own (unconsummated) aura of motherliness. DeMille even had Miriam directly refer to children when she said to the menacing soldiers at the Zorah water well: “Brave Philistines…showing your courage against children and old men.” Thereby centering Miriam within the human fringes of life (i.e., youth and old age) whilst simultaneously demonstrating her kindness, wisdom and courageousness—the stereotypical traits of super mums everywhere.

DeMille’s Samson certainly treated Miriam as worthy of being placed upon a pedestal (as a young virgin, but not as a mother), which he verbally reinforced when he tentatively said to her in his mother’s rustic kitchen: “Miriam…you’re further above me than the moon.” She lovingly retorted: “but not as hard to reach…only stretch out your hand” thereby indirectly indicating her acceptance of the “good girl,” pedestal-worthy tag, whilst for the audience, it simultaneously invited Samson to lovingly do what he did earlier to his mother with similar outstretched hands (i.e., kiss her).

Not surprisingly, DeMille also used celestial moon references in Samson’s betrayal scene with Delilah. Once Samson was shorn, captured, and physically bound, Ahtur referred to Delilah and said to him: “It is easier to catch the moon light than to hold such a woman.” DeMille may have been subtly implying that, spiritually speaking, Delilah (i.e., metaphorically moon light) is but a reflection of Miriam (i.e., metaphorically the moon) and that Miriam was easier to catch and hold than Delilah, which plot-wise was very true. Overall, Miriam was a very plausible fictional character, a romantic wannabe, a Danite/Israelite/Hebrew “good girl,” Samson’s ethnic equivalent, and the most domestically suitable but rejected potential wife for Samson.

Miriam’s “good girl” status was reinforced further at Delilah’s oasis love-nest where she is seen mounted upon a donkey, Virgin Mary-like, no doubt because DeMille envisioned Miriam as a “Virgin Mary” (Koury 1959, 231), and again in the company of children, the child-warrior Saul. Given the character geometries, a suspicious Saul disliked the duplicitous Delilah who in turn disdainfully ignored him. Furthermore, whilst contemplating Samson’s death at film’s end, Miriam was tendering to Saul as his de facto mother. Since Saul was
subtextually constructed as the youthful mirror of Samson, it was now the closest Miriam could ever get to experience the look, feel, and spirit of Samson himself. Saul had thus become a living surrogate for her lost love and a compensation for her childless state. The theme of missing children was very pronounced throughout *Samson and Delilah* to reinforce the erotic qualities of this ancient “story of sexy stories…always an entertaining and sacred scandal sheet” (Wurtzel 1998, 38).

**The Theme of Missing Children**

Inextricably associated with the theme of motherliness are children, whether direct or indirect, present or absent. Of all of Samson’s DeMillean women, only Hazel his mother is biologically a mother. Semadar is childless, Delilah is childless, and Miriam is childless. Given that Miriam is a “good woman” and a yet-to-be-married proto-mother, the closest DeMille could get to placing her in the desirable arena of motherliness is to repeatedly infuse her scenes with children. Particularly at the village water well with the cute little girl with pitcher near the gathered cluster of children eagerly listening to the old Story Teller (Francis J. McDonald), and in the repeated company of young Saul (e.g., at the water well, the oasis love-nest, in and near Dagon’s temple).

Even when Miriam is with Lesh Lakish (John Miljan) and her grandfather amongst a dinner table setting (i.e., another archetypal scene of domesticity), the specter of hungry children was raised by Lesh Lakish and directed personally to her. However, there is one notable exception to the Miriam-child associations, namely, when Miriam and Samson talked honestly about their future together while in Hazel’s rustic kitchen (and off-screen vicinity of Hazel and Manoah), children were *not* specifically mentioned. Nevertheless, the scene reeked of family domesticity including worried parents, a troubled path to love, and possibly a planned future marriage (and by subtle implication, children-to-come).

Conversely, whenever Delilah, and to a lesser extent, Semadar are in a scene, sexual images, erotic props, alluring actions and/or suggestive dialogue abounds, but this sort of erotic element is always missing from either of Miriam’s or Hazel’s scenes. Furthermore, when Miriam and Delilah are filmed together, it is frequently in the context of a Delilah-induced sexual rivalry. This confrontation was very pronounced at the oasis love-nest when Delilah passionately urged her Danite lover: “Don’t go Samson. This milk-faced girl with a cow’s eyes will lead you to your death” (which Delilah literally does to Samson twice, first,
when she betrayed him to the Philistines and secondly when she led Samson-the-prisoner to the soon-to-be-toppled pillars of Dagon’s temple). Later, a jealous Delilah privately said to a worried Miriam: “You love him. Women cannot deceive each other. It is in your face when you look at him. You want him for yourself.” And then later Delilah wistfully said: “I cannot fight his God, [then spoken louder and more firmly] but no woman will take him from me!”

When Miriam approached the Saran of Gaza during the temple of Dagon festivities to seek mercy for the blind, suffering Samson, Delilah mercilessly squashed her heartfelt plea saying: “What whimpering lies you tell our king. You want him for yourself. You want to feel the strength of his arms about you…to hold him close and comfort him. You want to bare him children. I’d rather see him dead than in your arms. Take her away.” This dialogue linked Miriam (metaphorically DeMille’s sparrow) with homebuilding, children and denied motherliness yet again, but this time from her romantic, ethnic and religious rival who has nothing to do with children herself, and thus a form of bitchy revenge against Miriam that only the lovelorn and childless can fully appreciate.

**Domesticity, Binarism and Beds**

Given the dramaturgical need for character control and differentiation, it is not too surprising to find DeMille delighting in further binary oppositions within his female character geometries. For example, both Philistine women (i.e., Semadar and Delilah) were: (a) ravishingly beautiful, (b) ornately dressed, (c) did no domestic duties, and (d) both were physically killed (i.e., by spear and crushing temple, respectfully). Whereas, both Israelite/Danite/Hebrew women (i.e., Hazel and Miriam) were: (a) pleasing to look at but not ravishing, (b) plainly dressed, (c) did domestic duties (e.g., Manoah’s wife busily cooked food; Miriam drew water and her hands were never idle), and (d) both were physically alive at films end, albeit, stressed, grieving and with uncertain futures (i.e., Hazel chained; Miriam man-less). Thus, Philistine women with disloyal, unwholesome, erotic forms of love were death affirming, whilst Israelite/Danite/Hebrew women with loyal, wholesome, spiritual forms of love were life affirming but suffering.

Both Philistine women (i.e., Semadar and Delilah) were associated with physical bed props, the quintessential accoutrement of sexuality. For example, Semadar-the-fickle is partially disrobed in her bridal chamber sitting on her marriage bed following her rebound wedding to Ahtur when Samson invaded her intimate space (which itself sexually resonated
with the idea of illegal penetration into a private area). Similarly, Delilah-the-courtesan is on a bed-like divan in her Gaza home while the Saran romanced her. Later, in Delilah’s oasis love- nest trap, Samson threw Delilah down onto the caravan bed covered with an animal fur, itself suggestive of base animalistic passions inside a cave-like lair.

After the betrayal and blinding of Samson, Delilah slept badly in her opulent, queen size bed inside her Gaza home. She hallucinated about a chained, suffering Samson, that in the context of the film was meant to be remorseful, but it psychoanalytically resonated as a dream metaphor about sexual fantasy with bondage overtones, coupled with faint subliminal intimations of frustrated sexual desire. Previously, in the Philistine prison gristmill, Delilah was more concerned with Samson not being able to voyeuristically ogle her beauty than with his sorrowful sightless plight. As she selfishly lamented to the Saran of Gaza: “He’s blind…He can never see me again,” which was the ultimate act of self-absorption and the very opposite of a mother’s unselfish love.

In appropriate contradistinction, both Israelite/Danite/Hebrew women (i.e., Hazel and Miriam) had no bed prop associations in keeping with the “good” women asexual stereotype. Hazel is in her rustic kitchen and Miriam is located in an outdoor kitchen (i.e., the Zorah water well) plus an indoor kitchen table scene (i.e., with her grandfather and Lesh Lakish). Religiously speaking, Philistines were outsiders/foreigners and followers of the false god Dagon who was made of earthly materials and easily destroyed by Samson. Whereas, Israelite/Danite/Hebrews were insiders and followers of the true, invisible God, which resonated with nature, and who divinely, engineered the destruction of the Philistine temple using Dagon’s idol as Samson’s instrument of holy comeuppance. This pagan statue was in effect the gigantic equivalent of Samson’s jawbone of an ass weapon (Judg. 15:15-17), which he had wielded against the Philistine soldiers with equally devastating effect earlier in the film. All of these carefully crafted contrasts were designed to enhance the engaging dramaturgy and binary symmetry of Samson and Delilah whilst generating further dimensions of character delineation between all of Samson’s womenfolk.

**Focusing Upon the Samson and Delilah Pairing**

DeMille-the-Christian pragmatically eschewed part of both fine art and Jewish religious traditions regarding Manoah’s wife (a.k.a Samson’s mother; DeMille’s Hazel), particularly regarding her alleged (but not scripturally stated) reputation for excessive piety and beauty.

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This is filmically understandable given that DeMille did not refer to the miraculous angelic visitations of Judges 13, and which journalist Phillip Lopate (1987, 77) considered was “a whole chapter “wasted” on this business.” If DeMille had filmed it, he would have had to make Samson’s parents an equally central focus of the film thus disempowering the specific Samson and Delilah emphasis. It would also have compromised the various miraculous deeds of Samson, which compared to an angel disappearing into a votive flame (Judg. 13:20) paled against Samson’s bond-breaking and mass slaughtering efforts (Judg. 15:15). However, the writer wonders that if DeMille had made his film today, with Hollywood’s easy access to computerized special effects, this spectacular angel transmutation scene may have been a main focus of the film, just as it was done in Nicolas Roeg’s 1996 Samson and Delilah.

If so, then DeMille would have needed to build more screen piousness and beauty into Hazel’s character that in turn would have overly complicated Hazel’s motherly role, and thus overly complicate DeMille’s usual binary signature (Kozlovic 2006). Dramatically speaking, DeMille could not let the pairing of Manoah and Hazel fight against the pairing of Samson and Delilah, nor could he let the piousness of Manoah’s wife clash with the piousness of Miriam. Likewise, DeMille could not let the unscriptural, but supposedly unsurpassed beauty of Manoah’s wife clash with the ravishing courtesan beauty of Delilah. Only Semadar’s beauty could rival Delilah, which according to the Bible was greater than hers (Judg. 15:2). Since both characters were implicit rivals in the biblical story (unlike the fictional Miriam), and Semadar was both scripturally and filmically scheduled for a quick demise (Judg. 15:6), DeMille not only allowed this beauty rivalry to happen, but he profitably used it to enhance the emotional and dramatic action on-screen for the eager audience.

For example, DeMille hinted at the romantic rivalry between Semadar and Delilah in Tubal’s garden when Delilah threw fruit at Samson (who referred to himself at the oasis pool as a “lion”) to get his attention and Semadar wryly replied: “My sister does her lion hunting with plumb pits.” DeMille also physically differentiated between both characters utilizing contrasting color symbolism. Semadar wears lighter colored clothes while Delilah wears darker colored clothes. DeMille also counterpointed Semadar, whom he called in script conferences “that frozen blonde,” “the big blonde” (Koury 1959, 231) and whom Samson called on-screen “a golden haired wife,” with a brunette Delilah, thus adding another deft layer of hair color binarism to his film specifically about a man who famously loses his hair.
This dramaturgical need for contrast also accounts for DeMille’s youngish Delilah-as-tomboy versus the mature Delilah-as-courtesan, and which itself was a valid scriptural trajectory, as Jack Sasson (1988, 334) pointed out: “It is commonly assumed that Delilah is, if not a prostitute, at least a courtesan,” thus supporting DeMille’s Samson dramatically calling her “the great courtesan of Gaza” at the oasis love-nest trap.

Conclusion

As demonstrated above, Samson’s three lovers were deftly constructed, dramatically engaging and scripturally insightful, thus verifying DeMille’s mastery of biblical storytelling and the deserved awarding of his industry accolades. Despite the critics’ repeated (and ill-informed) cries of artistic doom and despair, DeMille’s directorial peers have belatedly begun to recognize his filmmaking genius. As George Cukor confessed:

A long time ago I thought what he [DeMille] did was a big joke, just preposterous, and I couldn’t understand why the audience went for it in such a big way. There were always all sorts of orgies with belly dancers, veils and all the trappings. The eroticism was a joke. Then I saw The Ten Commandments [1956]...it was preposterous from the word go but I suddenly saw something new there, something which had escaped me before: the story telling was wonderful. The way that man could tell a story was fascinating—you were riveted to your seat. That’s exactly what he was: a great, great story teller. It was often ridiculous with all those excesses and froth but the man did tell a story. That was De Mille’s great talent and the secret behind his popular success (Long 2001, 27).

It was also the secret behind Samson and Delilah, which still holds up remarkably well today, especially compared to Lee Philips’ 1984 version and Nicolas Roeg’s 1996 version of the Samson saga, neither of which could out-shine DeMille’s film, and which have since been assigned to the proverbial dustbin of history. As J. C. McCann (2002, 92) succinctly put it: “the source of people’s knowledge is as likely to be Cecil B. DeMille’s film Samson and Delilah as it is the biblical text. Samson’s story contains all the features that make for a top-rated movie—excessive violence, romance and sex, and R-rated humor. No wonder it attracted DeMille!” And no wonder it pleased audiences worldwide!

His astute typecasting and skillful character construction added artistic depth and the resonance of authenticity to his biblical movies that helped make them unique, popular and successful. Not only was deft artistry a quintessential component of DeMille’s auteur signature that earned him the honorific tag of “auteur of auteurs” (Vidal 1995, 303) and “master of the film narrative” (Gomery 1991, 80), but also it helps explain why he was...
propelled far above his directorial peers. At least DeMille’s studio superiors knew his true worth. As movie mogul David O. Selznick confessed to fellow movie mogul Louis B. Mayer:

However much I may dislike some of his [DeMille’s] pictures from an audience standpoint, it would be very silly of me, as a producer of commercial motion pictures, to demean for an instant his unparalleled skill as a maker of mass entertainment, or the knowing and sure hand with which he manufactures his successful assaults upon a world audience that is increasingly indifferent if not immune to the work of his inferiors. As both professionally and personally he has in many ways demonstrated himself to be a man of sensitivity and taste, it is impossible to believe that the blatancy of his style is due to anything but a most artful and deliberate and knowing technique of appeal to the common denominator of public taste. He must be saluted by any but hypocritical or envious members of the picture business. But there has appeared only one Cecil B. DeMille (Behlmer 1972, 400).

The writer agrees wholeheartedly with this assessment. A closer, more sympathetic examination of DeMille’s films will yield many more insights and delights unappreciated to date. As such, further research into DeMille studies, biblical epics, and the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film is highly warranted, warmly recommended and already long overdue.

Notes
1. There is not one DeMille but many DeMilles. His career was so long, complex and multi-faceted that to describe, let alone justify each aspect would be prohibitive. Therefore, concise hyphenated compound terms will be used herein to help disentangle his various roles and avoid needless explanation, repetition and reader boredom.
2. Many scholars have spelled Cecil’s surname as “De Mille” or “de Mille” or “deMille” however, the correct professional spelling is “DeMille” (DeMille and Hayne 1960, 6), which will be used herein (unless quoting others).
3. DeMille was the biological son of a Christian father, Henry Churchill DeMille, an “Episcopal lay reader” (de Mille 1990, 161) who studied for the church but was never ordained (DeMille and Hayne 1960, 12-13), and a Sephardic Jewish mother, Matilda Beatrice “Bebe” DeMille nee Samuel (Edwards 1988, 14), an “English Jew” (de Mille 1990, 161). Consequently, Cecil has sometimes been academically described as a “half-Jew” (Herman, 2000, 18) which he also called himself (Carr 2003, 190), but nonetheless, he declared: “I am an Episcopalian” (DeMille and Hayne 1960, 274).
4. The Authorized King James Version of the Bible (KJV aka AV) will be used throughout (unless quoting other translations) as it was frequently used by DeMille (Higashi 1994, 180), and because most of the biblical phrases embedded in our culture come from that widely used translation (Taylor 1992, ix, 71).
5. Although this harlot could technically be considered another of Samson’s lovers, she appears to be only a one-night-stand for sexual release purposes rather than a true lover, especially considering that she was indulged in only after his Timnath wife-to-be (and expected night of consummated passion) was cruelly denied him. Since the harlot was not mentioned again, it supports the idea that she was just a disposable pleasure and not a meaningful romantic pursuit. Interestingly, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus considered Delilah to be “a harlot” (Whiston 1989, 147). However, there is no scriptural evidence supporting this claim, especially when buttressed by the romantic verse that Samson “loved a woman in the valley of Sorek [i.e., Delilah]” (Judg. 16:4) as opposed to the claim that Samson “went in unto her [i.e., the harlot]” (Judg. 16:1), which was a sexually blunt verse stripped of any romantic connotation. DeMille-the-harmonizer deftly referred to his on-screen Delilah as a “courtesan” and thus cunningly implied love and harlotry.

6. The lords of the Philistines said to Delilah: “we will give thee every one of us eleven hundred pieces of silver” (Judg. 16:5) [my emphasis], and since there are traditionally five such lords (Judg. 3:3; 1 Sam. 6:16), this meant that Delilah got 5,500 pieces of silver in total!

7. The Bible does not state that Delilah was a Philistine. Her ethnicity is unknown, but it is frequently assumed by the public and ecclesiastical authorities throughout the centuries that she is a card-carrying Philistine, presumably as a warning about the evils of foreign women. This decision further character-assassinated Delilah’s already tainted reputation as a sumber, betrayer and iconic “bad girl”. DeMille-the-Christian-apologist, DeMille-the-pop-culture-professional and DeMille-the-marketer did likewise. However, the (calculated?) scriptural fuzziness regarding her ethnic identity could be hiding the (unpalatable) fact that she is actually Samson’s kinswoman, after all, “Delilah” is a Hebrew name not a Philistine name (Exum 1993, 69) and so one of his own people betrayed him to the Philistines for money!

References


**Filmography**

*Barabbas* (1962, dir. Richard Fleischer)


*David and Bathsheba* (1951, dir. Henry King)

*Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1953, dir. Demer Daves)

*Ecstasy* (aka *Symphony of Love*) (1933, dir. Gustav Machaty)

*Esther and the King* (1960, dir. Raoul Walsh)

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Joseph and His Brethren (1962, dir. Irving Rapper)
Pretty Woman (1990, dir. Garry Marshall)
Quo Vadis (1951, dir. Mervyn LeRoy)
Salome (1953, dir. William Dieterle)
Samson and Delilah (1949, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
Samson and Delilah (1984, dir. Lee Philips)
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Sodom and Gomorrah (1963, dir. Robert Aldrich)
Solomon and Sheba (1959, dir. King Vidor)
The Big Fisherman (1959, dir. Frank Borzage)
The King of Kings (1927, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
The Prodigal (1955, dir. Richard Thorpe)
The Robe (1953, dir. Henry Koster)
The Silver Chalice (1954, dir. Victor Saville)
The Story of Ruth (1960, dir Henry Koster)
The Ten Commandments (1923, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
The Ten Commandments (1956, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)