

February 15, 2004

Meatfare Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

If she was even half as pretty as Hedy Lamarr, who played her in Cecil B. DeMilles' 1949 film, it is easy to see why Samson was fascinated with Delilah.

Fascinated too, over the centuries, were those many readers of Holy Scripture who found in the tragic romance of Delilah and the Danite the stuff of (as Milton remarks on the subject) "Acts enroll'd/ In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song."

However, the romance, it would seem, was mainly on Samson's side. While the Bible asserts that he loved Delilah (Judges 16:4), it does not even faintly hint that she loved him.

Much less do the pair appear to have been married. Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is an exception in regarding them as such, though Chaucer ("The Monk's Tale") does extract from their dolorous story a practical if dubious domestic counsel—namely, that wives are not to be trusted in matters touching limb and life.

The Delilah of DeMille's film is a Philistine, and this construction of the story is common. Indeed, Sainte-Saën's opera on the theme portrays her as an ardent nationalist, eager to avenge the Philistines' humiliation at Samson's hand.

Curiously, the portrayal of Delilah as a Philistine patriot makes her a mirror image, as it were, of Judith, who employed her native charms to wile the heart and whack off the head of Holofernes. We see them differently, nonetheless. The exploit we applaud in the daughter of Merari we deplore in the lady from Sorek Valley. The biblical Delilah, that is to say, is scarcely a winning figure.

DeMille did his best to make her such, not only by enhancing her with the merits of Hedy Lamarr, but by introducing into her heart a genuine affection of Samson. The loyalty of this affection is tested in the story, a trial that fills Delilah

with uncertainty and moral angst. Indeed, DeMille transforms her into a tragic figure, a sort of female Samson and his very counterpart, tossed about with doubts and torn with inner conflicts. Like Samson, she too repents at the end. One would think they were Romeo and Juliet.

To be sure, such an interpretation appeals to modern people, who prefer emotional muddling to moral principle, ambiguity to clarity. In today's world the ruling norm of validation in any moral choice is the level of discomfort endured in reaching it. In the popular mind every ethical decision is justified if it takes a sufficient toll on the emotions. Thus, Delilah's treatment of Samson, which earlier ages described as a shameless betrayal, might today be viewed as a regrettable but unavoidable personal dilemma ("a woman's right to choose"?), morally justified if it entails enough internal agonizing.

This raises the question of Delilah's motive, which is related to the matter of her nationality. After all, the Bible gives no clear indication that she was a Philistine or was prompted by a spirit of patriotism. Indeed, the evidence points in a different direction along both paths.

With respect to Delilah's nationality, we remark that Sorek Valley lay in the territory of Juda, not Dan. This detail does not support the case that she was a Philistine. Moreover, when Delilah was approached by the plotting Philistines, the latter made no appeal to any patriotism on her part. Finally, we recall that an earlier Philistine woman had already broken faith with Samson (Judges 14:15-19). Although we can hardly regard this Danite as the sharpest knife in the drawer, we would not expect him to be duped by a Philistine woman a second time.

With respect to Delilah's motive, fear plays no part. It is instructive that the Philistines do not threaten her, as they threatened their earlier compatriot. On the contrary, they entice Delilah's greed with the promise of a reward. As far as the Bible is concerned, she is driven by no motive so noble as patriotism. She would simply like to have some cash. If the latter is available, there is not the faintest hesitation on the lady's part, much less a case of scruples. Indeed, there is nothing in the text to suggest that the Philistines have to

do more than name their price, and Sweet Little D is primed for action.

If, as seems to be the case, Delilah belonged to the tribe of Juda, then Samson was betrayed to the Philistines by an insider. In this respect she resembles no one in the Bible more than Judas Iscariot, who also knew a thing or two about betrayal with kisses, provided the payment was adequate.

In Delilah's case, the payment was ample. Each of the five Philistine lords promised her eleven hundred pieces of silver when the job was over, and Delilah, always good at math, made a prompt decision. If she entertained any doubts on the business, the Bible doesn't mention it. It would be laughable to do so.

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