

2023

## Samson's Performance of Strength and Superiority in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

Anders Isaac Schiller  
*SUNY Geneseo*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day>

---

### Recommended Citation

Schiller, Anders Isaac (2023) "Samson's Performance of Strength and Superiority in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*: Vol. 2022, Article 4.

Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2022/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the GREAT Day at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of GREAT Day by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact [KnightScholar@geneseo.edu](mailto:KnightScholar@geneseo.edu).

---

## Samson's Performance of Strength and Superiority in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

### Cover Page Footnote

sponsored by Dr. Samuel Fallon, PhD and Dr. Lisa Meyer, PhD

# Samson's Performance of Strength and Superiority in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*

Anders Isaac Schiller

---

---

*sponsored by Samuel Fallon, PhD and Lisa Meyer, PhD*

---

---

## ABSTRACT

In one of John Milton's final works, *Samson Agonistes*, the broken hero Samson stands apart from his Israelite countrymen in both ability and closeness to God. At birth, Samson is gifted immense strength which is connected to his hair and a prophecy that declares that he will "lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines." In one interpretation of the drama, Milton understands that Samson is of what he considers to be the "lower" Jewish race, but he still writes Samson as a prefiguration of Christianity because he supposedly transcends his Judaism. Contrastingly, I posit that Milton instead positions Samson as someone who is desperate to be the hero everyone expects him to be, leading him to act with selfish intentions. He behaves as if he can communicate with God, who is directly informing him of how he should fulfill the prophecy of his birth—through self-sacrifice. While he does fulfill the prophecy by killing a large number of his enemies alongside himself, he also misleads his audience of Israelites into believing that his death is the only path to their freedom. He has the opportunity to return to his people after he regains his powers in prison, tactically hiding his abilities from his captors rather than showcasing them immediately. Instead, he chooses suicide as a quick path to his freedom from the demands of his life as a hero and a judge—freedom to leave the task of saving his people to the next warrior.

---

---

*Samson Agonistes* by John Milton follows the story of Samson from the Book of Judges. Although Samson is an undeniably Jewish warrior and Milton was a staunch Puritan, he is drawn to this hero. Samson is a special case, as his is, on the surface, a story of a struggle toward faith in a postlapsarian, pre-Christian world. In *Samson Agonistes*, he rejects the Jewish and material idea present in the Book of Judges that his powers correspond to his hair growth. Using Christian-esque argumentation, Samson instead claims that he wins his powers back because God grants him a "final pardon" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 1171) due to his renewed faith. Through this sense of faith, Samson claims that he can discern God's will for how these powers should be used. After making these claims, he uses his newly-reappearing powers to topple the Temple of Dagon, killing a number of his enemies alongside himself. Due to his appeal to faith, his compatri-

ots celebrate this action. Milton, however, reveals that Samson's initial claim—that his powers are necessarily connected to his "correct" sense of faith—was spurious. Despite Samson's outward heroism, Milton demonstrates a suspicion toward Samson and his proto-Christianity. Through appropriating an ambivalent position on the value of Samson's actions, he is able to investigate the efficacy of Jewish and Christian modes of reason against the force of Samson's individualistic desire.

Milton lived during a complicated and painful era for Jewish people. England was extremely antisemitic, and its Jewish people had been portrayed as murderers well before their expulsion in the year 1290. Milton was born in 1608, and so this policy held for much of his life. However, change arrived in the 1650s: the government of Oliver Cromwell, which Milton supported, legally permitted Jewish people to return. Milton's support for Cromwell, however, did not extend to the policy of readmission. This lack of support is because, as N. I. Matar (1987) points out, he held the idea that the Jewish people had to be returned to Israel prior to the second coming of Christ (p. 113). This idea was popular amongst Milton's contemporaries. The Restoration of the Jews was supposedly a necessary "signal of the inauguration of the messianic kingdom" (Matar, 1987, p. 112). Milton had hoped that the Second Coming would be prompted by the Cromwellian revolution, and so it was vital that the revolutionaries act to hasten Christ's arrival. Of course, he was disappointed when his highest hope for the revolution was dashed (Matar, 1987, p. 113).

By the end of his life, Milton had changed his perspective on the role of the Jewish people in the second coming. According to Matar (1987), in addition to believing that the Jewish people could not be guided to Israel by the British and must be returned through an act of God, he believed that the second coming would happen after a sincere conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity (p. 119). To Milton, Jews were the people who both held God's favor and rejected it when they rejected Jesus Christ as their messiah. Therefore, their continued existence as a group was a wrong that not only had to be righted, but was divinely fated to be corrected. By this point, Milton evidently did not respect the Jewish people as an autonomous religious group, and repudiated their existence as such.

As Milton viewed the Jewish people as potential Christians, or people who might have been Christians, so did he view the ancient Jewish people who lived before the coming of Christ. Indeed, he likely felt more sympathy toward them, as Judaism preceded Christianity, and so these Jewish people could not spurn Christ. Of course, he admired the Jewish texts which were fundamental to Christianity. The Old Testament books were written before the birth of Christ, and so Christians such as Milton could view them as a prefiguration of the New Testament, authored by God and gifted to the still-ignorant Jewish people for a limited period. However, Milton's interest in Jewish texts went beyond the Old Testament and works which had been accepted into Christian canon. He had a deep theological interest in Hebraic thought, including the laws and philosophies of the ancient Hebrew people, which so happened to still exist through the Jews contemporary to Milton—whom he neither encountered nor

cared for. In lieu of a Jewish teacher, he was introduced to the foundations of Jewish thought through writers such as John Selden, who was simultaneously a Christian and a Talmudic/Rabbinic scholar. Selden was not himself a Rabbi; rather, he analyzed the literature of Jewish people, who already had well-established traditions of discourse. Selden also did not know any Jewish practitioners, but this limitation did not stop him from criticizing Mosaic Law, the Christian shorthand for Jewish jurisprudence. Selden wrote during a period which Isaac Herzog (1931) refers to as England's "Revival of Learning" (p. 236). During this time, there was a renewed interest in Hebrew antiquity as it related to Christian interests. Of course, Jewish people were still not included in British discourse during the zenith of Selden's popularity. Therefore, most knowledge about Jewish people was translated and interpreted by pious Christians. Milton seems to accept Selden's expertise. In *Areopagitica*, a speech about allowing controversial works which were initially viewed as being against the Church (which Selden's were) to be published, Milton (1644/n.d.-a) proclaimed Selden to be "the chief of learned men reputed in this land."

It is revealing that Selden, alongside other Christian Hebraists of the time, was likely the source for much of Milton's knowledge on Jewish literature (Biberman, 1997, p. 142). Selden's core Hebraic philosophy is that the contemporary authoritarianism of Christianity is part of a long tradition stretching back to the Jewish laws of antiquity, and that a liberated Christianity could be free of the constraints of Jewish legal doctrine. According to Selden, the ancient Jewish people created particular material laws which could be enforced through punishment in order to keep their populace loyal to their broader spiritual principles (Herzog, 1931). Selden (1696/n.d.-b), in his *Table-talk*, cites an important example of such a principle which is translated into law is circumcision (p. 5). In Judaism, circumcision represents an eternal connection to one's faith, and that connection to Judaism is made permanent with the cutting of the foreskin. However, Paul separates the commitment to Judaism from a commitment to God. As he writes in his letter to the Romans, one can be devoted to God for an eternity with foreskin, or can act against God without it, as "a real circumcision is not just a matter of the body" (*King James Bible*, 1769/1991, Romans 2:28-29). This letter held the initial purpose of separating Christian-Jews from their non-Christian counterparts. It clearly influences both Selden and Milton's understanding of a Jewish-Christian dichotomy, in which Judaism represents the material, and Christianity is open to the immaterial world.

Despite the early schism between Jews and Christians, Selden believes that Christianity continues to suffer from Jewish influences. According to Ofir Haivry (2017), Selden repeatedly asserts that "Christianity is a reformed Judaism, that it therefore retains many things from that religion, and that those who neglect this crucial connection are either deceived or deceivers" (p. 401). Selden (1618/n.d.-a) emphasizes that the consequences of remaining within the Jewish material mode are immense within his *Historie of Tithes*, his most salient argument to this end. In this *Historie*, Selden (1618/n.d.-a) first describes the ways in which this mode is outdated, claiming that "amongst other of their Mosaicall Laws, [post-diaspora Priests and historians] put...

their paying of Tithes for one specially that was confined to the land of Israel and Jerusalem” (p. 23). However, his entire *Historie* argues that the Church’s contemporary fiduciary and fiscal policies are based in historic modes of tithing, including those of the Hebrews and the ancient Greeks. In Selden’s (1618/n.d.-a) account, the Jewish tithing system is the first in history which is relevant to the Church’s policies which he seeks to delegitimize. The core problem with these connected systems is that the Jewish tithing system, like the Church’s policies, are based in “positive Laws” (Selden, 1618/n.d.-a, p. IV), laws which have to be dictated, rather than “Divine right” (p. IV), which can always be determined through reason whether it is dictated or not. This rational approach to divine providence is known as *natural law*, and I will call it such when the truth is determined through reason rather than faith. Selden therefore conflates Jewish positive law with the Church’s oppression, essentially positioning Judaism as the root of its evils. Milton, infamous for his loathing of the Church, seems to borrow this notion. Like Selden, he uses arguments against the positive Mosaic Laws to legitimize his attacks on Christian Church regulations. He refutes Mosaic Law by asserting that human-created regulations are impediments to natural actions. Milton (1825/2011) claims in *The Christian Doctrine* that:

Seeing, however, that man was made in the image of God, and had the whole law of nature so implanted and innate in him, that he needed no precept to enforce its observance, it follows, that if he received any additional commands, whether respecting the tree of knowledge, or the institution of marriage, these commands formed no part of the law of nature, which is sufficient of itself to teach whatever is agreeable to right reason, that is to say, whatever is intrinsically good. (p. 297)

Milton is specifically arguing for the right to divorce in *The Christian Doctrine*, against British jurisprudence. In this argument, Milton (1825/2011) asserts that he is able to determine what is “intrinsically good” using his own sense of reason. Milton believes that reason and personal observation of nature inherently supersede positive law. Milton’s elevation of natural over positive law corresponds to a more general Pauline subordination of law to faith, to one’s inner and natural relationship with the divine.

This Jewish/Christian dichotomy and the way in which a Christian faith should be asserted are particularly relevant topics to the time during which Milton wrote *Samson Agonistes*, toward the end of his life. By this time, Milton had already been engaged with faith, which was partially created by his rational approach to liberty and toleration. Despite this rational approach, he faced disappointment. Much like Samson was an Israelite hero prior to his capture by the Philistines, Milton was a Cromwellian revolutionary against the Stuart monarchy. At first, the revolution was a success. Cromwell’s government had the tolerant Puritan Church replace the authoritative Church of England, thus weakening the hold of material law. To Milton, this revolution was one of true faith, and he was dedicated to the Commonwealth and its Republican ideals. However, these ideals did not possess much staying power, nor did their implementation prompt the Second Coming. Instead, Charles II took back the

monarchy with a vengeance, casting Milton and his compatriots into near political irrelevance and restoring the Church of England. Milton was imprisoned for his role in the beheading of Charles I, a punishment for which he argued in the work *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, where he called “to bring delinquents without exemption to a fair tribunal by the common national law against murder” (Milton, 1650/n.d.-d), and the punishment for crimes such as murder and treason was execution. He found himself blind and dejected, fallen from his high position as a civil servant to his nation. He was freed from prison due to the actions of the monarchy, which issued the “Act of free and generall pardon idempnity and oblivion” (Charles II, n.d.), a document which granted he and many of his compatriots pardon. His pardon, however, did not win him back the Commonwealth, nor the power he had held under Cromwell.

It is interesting, then, that *Samson Agonistes* is a work about the options a revolutionary has when their efforts in the name of the Lord have miserably failed, and they now live in a world controlled by their enemy. As *Samson Agonistes* is unmoored from the socially dominant Christianity, Milton is able to express his perpetual frustration toward the positive laws restored by the Church of England by positioning Judaism as a similarly limiting force. In doing so, Milton more than disagrees with a Jewish institution for the ways in which it evolved into an oppressive Christian one: he questions the efficacy of basing his revolutionary principles off of his inner interpretations of truth.

Although Samson is given similar experiences to Milton, their differences between the character and the author become stark when one considers their unique revolutionary roles. Unlike Milton, Samson’s uniqueness is of the body rather than the head. He slayed an army with the jawbone of an ass and killed a lion with his bare hands (*King James Bible*, 1769/1991, Judges 15:5). Samson also supposes that he is in direct communion from God, but in a very different way from Milton’s erudite visions which were reasoned through many argumentative texts. Instead, Samson operates on sheer instinct, following his inner sensations before considering reason. Samson ultimately takes on a very human, fallible role which would be difficult for Milton, the civil servant and intellectual, to assume. Samson’s fundamental impulsivity aligns with neither the Jewish idea of remaining regulated by law, nor with the Miltonic one of reasoning one’s way toward God’s will. Samson’s position as the embodied revolutionary therefore allows Milton’s audience to explore what it means to experience a sensation of faith which is not confined by the limits of ideology or even structured thought.

## WHAT MAKES SAMSON SO SPECIAL?

Samson’s special connection to God is derived from the fact that he is a Nazirite, a man who “consecrateth himself unto the LORD” for the sake of serving Him in a particular way (*King James Bible*, 1769/1991, Numbers 6:6). Generally, a Nazirite takes on a mission for the Lord. Samson’s purpose is revealed when an angel tells his mother that she

will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines. (*King James Bible*, 1769/1991, Judges 13:5)

Samson's role seems simple—he must never cut his hair, and he must use his abilities to deliver Israel. However, within the context of Jewish law, Samson's "Nazirite" status becomes complex. The Nazirite distinction was originally established in Mosaic Law, a phrase which specifically refers to the 613 laws derived from the ten commandments, expounded upon in the Torah, and codified in the Jewish interpretative text, the Talmud. While Samson would have had access to Mosaic Law in his time, the Talmuds, of course, were written much later. However, as they became a part of Jewish discourse long before Milton's birth, I am including them to emphasize the ways in which Jewish scholars interpreted the commandments relevant to the Book of Judges over time. While the prophecy of Samson's birth is succinct, there are many rules for Nazirites under Mosaic Law. Generally, one is only a Nazirite for a specific period during which they must perform particular holy tasks (*King James Bible*, 1769/1991, Numbers 6:5). According to the Halakhot, or the laws written in the Talmud Nazir, a Nazirite such as Samson holds the particular designation of Nazir Shimshon, named for Samson, in order to compensate for this divergence from the law established by the Book of Numbers (*Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Nazir, Folios 4a-4b). An ordinary Nazirite is also not allowed to touch a dead person (which Samson does), is allowed to cut his hair (which Samson is not), and must sacrifice animals when tainted. There are other figures in the Torah who might be Nazirites like Samson, but there is no code in Numbers which effectively organizes these Nazirites-from-birth. It therefore seems as if God's, or the angel's, word defines Samson far more effectively than Mosaic Law does.

Still, Samson attempts to adhere to some shallow components of the Nazirite code in accordance with Mosaic Law. The Talmud Nazir does not clarify whether or not a Nazirite Shimshon is absolved of the responsibility to not drink wine, although the angel specifically tells Samson's mother to consume "no wine or other intoxicant, and eat nothing unclean" (*King James Bible*, 1769/1991, Judges 13:7) while she is pregnant with her son, lest he be tainted. Notably, then, the Chorus in *Samson Agonistes* praises Samson for not drinking, saying, "O madness, to think use of strongest wines / And strongest drinks our chief support of health, / When God with these forbid'n made choice to rear His mighty Champion, strong above compare" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 553-556). This is, of course, an anachronistic exaggeration—the Jewish people of antiquity did not love wine so much as to make it their "chief support of health" in a way which so drastically differed from Renaissance practices of drinking alcohol rather than consuming unclean water. Milton's choice to make Samson align with the typical Nazirite code suggests that Samson aligned himself strictly with certain aspects of Jewish morality prior to his imprisonment. That Samson naturally avoids drinking bolsters the idea that Samson is a man of genuine faith, someone who does not shy away from the difficult actions which constitute a positive Jewish practice. Ultimately,



what Samson could and could not do under Mosaic Law might be argued over the course of centuries, and so it was by Jewish scholars. Milton, however, seeks to more tightly define Samson's role within Jewish society in *Samson Agonistes*, even if this social role is one which Samson is not divinely obligated to assume. In doing so, he demonstrates how Samson gains social credibility through appeals to Jewish jurisprudence. The Nazirite status is therefore not only special to Samson because it defines what he must do, but it also gives Samson a way to be well-beloved by his community.

One feature about which it is ambiguous as to whether or not the specifics of Samson's Nazirite code fall within the domain of the material or the immaterial (faith) is that of the hair upon his head. The fact that the angel tells Samson's mother that his head is "never to be touched by a razor" somewhat implies that his Nazirite abilities directly correlate to whether or not hair is on his head (*King James Bible*, 1769/1991, Judges 13:5). In Judges, he loses his abilities when it is cut off. Still, the loss of ability was not necessarily related to his hair. Instead, it might have been a punishment from God for Samson allowing Delilah to cut the hair. However, Judges goes on to say, "Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven" (*King James Bible*, 1769/1991, Judges 16:22). The word "Howbeit" implies that Samson regaining his abilities in Judges 16:28 is possible because his hair is no longer shorn. Therefore, the physical hair, which grows back, indicates whether or not Samson is strong within the Book of Judges.

However, in *Samson Agonistes*, the correlation between Samson's hair growth and his abilities is not indicated for much of the play. Until nearly the drama's conclusion, it is heavily implied that Samson has lost his powers and that they have shown no sign of return. He claims that God has rejected him for his actions, and that he has "fall'n" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 414), a word which evokes the eternal exile of Adam and Eve. While he is rejecting his father's proposal to free him from the Philistine prison, Samson shares an imagined scene to the Chorus wherein he returns to Israel, "these redundant locks / Robustious to no purpose clustring down" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 568-569), making his return worthless. He believes that he will be able to grow hair, but that it will not return his abilities. Additionally, with the word "these," as opposed to "those," he indicates the presence of hair on his head at the moment of his speech. He therefore implies that while he has grown some hair, his abilities did not grow alongside it. It appears to the reader that the fundamental concept of Samson's hair being related to his powers must be flawed. This rejection of the hair-power connection suggests that Samson was focusing too much on physicality, and he should have been expending more energy on defending his metaphysical purity so that God would not punish him. That is to say, he proposes that he was focusing too much on the Mosaic Law—the letter of the law—than on faith.

Thus, Samson wields his power offensively when the use of that power aligns with a spiritual motive. Two climactic moments best capture Samson's movement toward faith. The first is when he claims he can fight the giant Harapha because: "My trust is in the living God who gave me / At my Nativity this strength" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c,

lines 1140-1141). Samson does not actually fight Harapha in this scene, but is unwavering in his insistence that he can do so, that “[his] heels are fetter’d, but [his] fist is free” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 1235). He seems to believe that since he has faith in God, he has won His favor back, and thus “this strength” which he would require to defeat Harapha. The second moment during which he simultaneously wields his physical and spiritual potential arrives just before he topples the Temple of Dagon. He feels “rouzing motions” which “dispose / To something extraordinary [his] thoughts” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, 1383-1384). It is tempting to understand the *rouzing motions* as spontaneous phenomena, a feeling which arises without precedent. The fact that Samson does not attempt to provide a natural law argument to his fellow Israelites suggests that these motions were borne out of faith, a pure connection to God. Should these motions come from Samson’s connection to God, they are not a product of Samson’s human folly, but his divine designation. The Jewish Mosaic Law calls its constituents to follow its letters rather than their less material experiences of faith. Samson’s immaterial justification of these motions therefore causes Samson to appear close to God in a distinctly Christian way.

This idea that Samson is a proto-Christian, however, becomes complicated by Samson’s lack of candor. One also has to remember that the rousing motions which precede Samson’s attack on the Temple of Dagon are not unique. In his former Jewish life, he felt that “intimate impulse” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 223) to marry Delilah. It is tempting to argue, as Samuel Stollman (1972) does, that “It is significant that Samson dispenses with the ‘external’ Law at decisive junctures in his life only when guided by ‘intimate impulse,’ which is Milton’s Old Testament equivalent of the ‘internal’ Law, the Holy Spirit operating within the regenerate” (p. 337). To do so would eliminate the tensions between Samson’s poor decisions made prior to his imprisonment, his Jewish responsibilities, and the misery he feels as a prisoner because he would have both killed himself and married the woman whom he desired at God’s behest. However, I do not believe that Samson’s relationship to God is so straightforward. First, the idea that Samson’s strength stems directly from God’s mood toward him at any given moment is only viable because it refutes the idea that Samson’s power is tied to his hair. However, Samson’s strength is, in fact, connected to his hair.

It becomes clear by the end of *Samson Agonistes* that Samson does have his superhuman strength within the prison, before he topples the Temple of Dagon, because he states of the Philistines: “Much more affliction then already felt / They cannot well impose, nor I sustain; / If they intend advantage of my labours / The work of many hands, which earns my keeping” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, 1255-1259). Due to the strength he possessed while he had his hair, Samson slayed entire armies, killed lions, and lifted the Gaza gate (*King James Bible*, 1769/1991, Judges 16:3). The only reason he was ever imprisoned was because he lost his strength due to the loss of his hair. The fact that he can do the “work of many hands” for the Philistines proves that during his imprisonment, he still possesses superhuman strength. It is clear that, as in the Book of Judges, he regained his strength as soon as his hair had started to grow. Still, Samson publicly denies this fact in front of the other Israelites and the Philistine

messenger, claiming that his “strength...[is] returning with [his] hair” due to God’s “Favour renew’d” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 1355, 1357). Here, it is implied that Samson’s hair has grown because God has forgiven him, making the hair growth itself a byproduct of his gift, rather than a prerequisite for its use. It is unsurprising that Samson claims that God favors him at the moment when he decides to topple the Temple. The fabricated approval of God for the way in which Samson uses his powers brings into question Samson’s pseudo-Christianity and his commitment to Judaism, because Samson’s actions are no longer tied to Christian principles nor Mosaic Laws.

## SAMSON’S MOTIVATIONS BECOME SUSPECT FROM BOTH THE PERSPECTIVE OF MOSAIC LAW AND THAT OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

Once the audience realizes that the Mosaic conditions of Samson’s Nazirite status are still valid, the rationalizations for his actions become complicated. He clings onto both faith and law to rationalize his attack on the Temple, first stating: “Be of good courage, I begin to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my thoughts” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, 1382-1384). Samson here justifies his plan of attack through faith: the idea that due to divine providence, he has an internal sense of what he must do. However, he still clarifies that he will: “Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonour / Our Law, or stain my vow of Nazarite” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, 1386-1387). Samson’s reasoning is ambivalent in this passage. He seems to act primarily out of a sense of faith, yet he still (barely) attempts to fit within the confines of Mosaic Law. These ideas are contradictory. Why would it matter whether or not he stains his vow if he is acting in accordance with faith? Faith supersedes law—it is therefore questionable that he invokes law during his final defense of his actions. Surely he does not fear social repercussions, given that he knows he will not survive the attack on the Temple. Furthermore, his assertion that he will not break Mosaic Law seems flawed. Only a few lines earlier, he tells the Philistine messenger that: “[t]hou knowst I am an Ebrew... / Our Law forbids at thir Religious Rites / My presence; for that cause I cannot come [to the Temple of Dagon]” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 1320-1322). It is obvious that under any normal circumstances, it would never be acceptable for Samson to perform at the Temple due to it being a display of idolatry. Therefore, it is unclear how he is adhering to Mosaic Law, despite his insistence that he is. I suggest that this ambivalence Samson has regarding both the material and immaterial ideologies indicates that his actions should be ascribed to neither.

The Chorus is hardly ambivalent, and speaks confidently on Samson’s rightful spiritual position. He served Israel, and the Chorus speaks admiringly of his awesome deeds even at the beginning of the drama (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 120-150). They are quick to wonder, “Which shall I first bewail, / Thy Bondage or lost Sight, / Prison within Prison / Inseparably dark?” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 151-154). This question essentially asks: what should the Israelites mourn more, the loss of Samson as

a warrior, or Samson's loss of heroism? To the Chorus, Samson's Israelite comrades, Samson's deeds are a product of an "outward light" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 160). This light is reminiscent of the "holy light" (Milton, 1667/n.d.-b, Book 3 line 1) in *Paradise Lost*. Book 3's invocation is complex—Milton (1667/n.d.-b) wonders whether this light is God, as "God is light" (Book 3 line 3), or if it is a "Coeternal Beam" (Book 3 line 2) which operates "at the voice of God" (Book 3 lines 9-10). Regardless, this light is both divine and an appropriate source of inspiration. Samson's deeds, which are a product of this outward light, are contrasted with the "inward light" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 162) he possesses now that he has been blinded—according to the Chorus, *inward light* "Puts forth no visual beam" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 163). Samson's blindness then separates him from that coeternal beam which transmits divine inspiration. The Chorus goes on to say that Samson's inward light is merely a "mirror of our fickle state" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 164). That is to say, now that Samson has been blinded and has lost his power, he can only be inspired by his human folly rather than by divine providence. The Chorus posits that prior to his imprisonment, Samson maintained a pure connection with the divine, which was replaced by human folly once he was blinded. Once he is dead, the Chorus claims that he "Bore witness gloriously" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 1751) to highest wisdom. They trust that Samson's sacrifice restored his lost sight, and that his act required that external light to once again reach him. However, this binary understanding of Samson's folly and connection to the divine minimizes the fact that he also committed human errors while he held the position of an Israelite hero.

As a hero, Samson was disproportionately burdened with the responsibility to protect Israel. The Israelite heads of tribes offloaded their political responsibilities onto Samson, and, "seeing those great acts which God had done / Singly by [Samson] against their Conquerours / Acknowledg'd not, or not at all consider'd / Deliverance offer'd" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 243-246). They allowed Samson to fight for them, but were not grateful for his work, nor did they put in the effort themselves to be liberated from Philistine oppression. Instead, when these heads of tribes, specifically the tribe of Judah, had the chance, they gave up Samson to the Philistines (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 258-261). Then, when Samson escaped from the cords in which he was bound, he fought the Philistines alone. He won, but notes that "Had Judah that day join'd, or one whole Tribe, / They had by this possess'd the Towers of Gath, / And lorded over them whom now they serve" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 265-267). Samson won a victory over the Philistines, but he could not have ended the war between the two groups as an Israelite hero, because his people did not support him properly.

Due to his uniqueness as Israel's defender, and as a "person separate to God," Samson was also afforded undue privilege prior to his imprisonment. He was able to follow his urges against the tenets of Mosaic Law when he married the woman from Timna, claiming from prison that: "what I motion'd was of God; I knew / From intimate impulse, and therefore urg'd / The Marriage on; that by occasion hence / I might begin Israel's Deliverance" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 222-225). Samson here posits that he has a direct connection to God through sensations of faith. It is difficult to disprove

Samson's internal feelings of the divine which cause him to decide that his first marriage is legitimate. However, the same cannot be said for his marriage to Delilah, for which his justification was less watertight. He tells the Chorus that "[he] thought [the marriage to Delilah] lawful from [his] former act, / And the same end" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 231-232), which is to infiltrate the Philistines. However, he notably lacks the impulse from God which prompts him to marry Delilah; he assumes that the marriage to Delilah is the same as the marriage to the woman from Timna, even though he failed to follow through on his marriage to that woman. Samson doesn't consider that in leaving the woman from Timna when she proves "false" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 227), he allows his personal desires for a good wife to override the feeling which characterizes faith. However, Samson still "didst plead / Divine impulsion prompting how [he] might'st / Find some occasion to infest our Foes" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 420-422) to Manoa so that he might accept his marriage to Delilah, even though he does not claim to have actually felt that impulse within *Samson Agonistes*. Samson incorrectly appeals to faith in order to justify his disastrous marriage to Delilah to the Israelites. He therefore uses his unique connection to God to grant himself a marriage which is in concordance with his lust.

It is important to consider this flawed dynamic when analyzing Samson's "rouzing motions" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 1382). Whether or not these motions are real, Samson once again claims to the Israelites that he is receiving a message from God. He does not use natural law to support this claim to the Chorus, but demonstrates his reasoning post-mortem when those rouzing motions lead to many of the Israelites' enemies being crushed and killed. As I have proven that Samson has been untruthful about multiple aspects of his relationship to the divine, it is suspect that this claim allows him to follow another desire which transcends the usual bounds of Mosaic righteousness—the desire to die, and to do so honorably by Israelite standards. Samson has been having thoughts about dying and killing due to his sense of failure. Toward the beginning of the drama, he claims that he is "Buried, yet not exempt / By priviledge of death and burial / From worst of other evils, pains and wrong" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 103-105). Samson is in horrible physical conditions, having been blinded, imprisoned, and forced to do hard labor. However, it is not his physical pain, but instead his spiritual guilt which causes his woes. Manoa and Delilah offer to take him home, but he refuses because he wishes to "pay on his punishment" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 489). At this early point in the text, Samson wants to die, but is prepared to suffer indefinitely instead. As the drama progresses, the spiritual ideas behind Samson's desire to die evolve. When Harapha leaves his ward in a fury, the Chorus expresses that "He will directly to the Lords, I fear, / And with malicious counsel stir them up / Some way or other yet further to afflict thee" (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 1250-1252). Samson responds:

come what will, my deadliest foe will prove

My speediest friend, by death to rid me hence,

The worst that he can give, to me the best.

Yet so it may fall out, because thir end

Is hate, not help to me, it may with mine

Draw thir own ruin who attempt the deed. (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, lines 1262-1267)

He fantasizes about exactly what happens at the climax of the play: dying and taking his enemies with him. His claim that “The worst that he can give...[is] the best” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 1264) does not seem to align with either Jewish or Christian ideas about death. To commit unnecessary suicide breaks the Jewish principle of *pi-kuach nefesh* (Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.), because Samson has many options besides self-killing. For one, his father has made it clear throughout the text that he is trying to ransom Samson and bring him home. For another, it becomes clear by the end of the text that Samson does have his superhuman strength within the prison. How could the hero who slew “A thousand fore-skins” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 144) and pulled up the Gates of Azza in a single battle not be able to kill the Lords who might attack him? In this case, Samson allowing himself to be killed would clearly be suicide. It therefore would not be an acceptable action within Milton’s Christian worldview either.

Despite the fact that suicide is generally prohibited in both Judaism and, anachronistically, Christianity, Samson’s rousing motions allow him to simultaneously fulfill his desire to die and his desire to serve God. His is Schrödinger’s righteousness. He technically does nothing which “may dishonour [Mosaic] Law, or stain [his] vow of Nazarite” (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 1386), and manages to become, in the eyes of the Israelites, God’s “faithful Champion,” all because no one can dispute what is inside of Samson’s head (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 1751). However, the fact that Samson finds himself righteous in these two competing courts of morality indicates that his actions are once again founded upon his desires, rather than a good-faith interpretation of God’s will. Both Christian and Jewish interpretations of Samson’s final suicide fall short because they both rely on Samson’s word to give shape to divine truth. What is truly righteous within the world of *Samson Agonistes* is disquietingly unknown, if only because Samson is so much louder than God in this text.

In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton casts doubt on the righteousness of Samson toppling the Temple of Dagon, blurring the lines between triumph and tragedy. He uses Samson’s indeterminable connection to God, Samson, in order to reveal the limits of a human comprehension of God. Although he outwardly submits to Mosaic Law and externalizes an inner sense of “faith,” there is no action which Samson takes which ensures that he is following God’s will. Instead, these forms of connection to God serve as tools for Samson to assert his desires: he secures his position and legacy in Israelite society through the Mosaic Nazirite status, and justifies extra-Mosaic actions through claiming “faith.” While Milton remains ambivalent toward Samson’s righteousness,

this ambivalence is not neutral. Instead, Milton's obfuscation of Samson's motivations calls his Christian audience to action. While it would be ignoble to disregard another's rousing motions, the pursuit of righteousness while God's voice is absent requires that a community consult natural law in order to ascertain the truth of those motions. The sacred conclusions to natural law arguments are within every person. It is the responsibility of every Israelite, every Puritan, to act alongside their warriors rather than leaving them to operate on impulse, to act from the body and the mind. The Israelites and Puritans must, therefore, have the strength to consider "Deliverance offerd" to their communities through the resource of reason—and they must have the strength to accept the burden of freedom as a community (Milton, 1671/n.d.-c, line 246).

## REFERENCES

- Biberman, M. (1997). Milton's Tephillin. *Milton Quarterly*, 31(4), 136-145. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24465133>
- Charles II, (n.d.) An act of free and generall pardon idempnity and oblivion. In J. Raithby (Ed.), *Statutes of the Realm: Volume 5, 1628-80* (pp. 226-234). British History Online <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/statutes-realm/vol5/pp226-234> (Original work published 1819).
- Haivry, O. (2017). *John Selden and the Western political tradition*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511894923>
- Herzog, I. (1931). John Selden and Jewish law. *Journal of Comparative Legislation and International Law*, 13(4), 236-245. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/753376>
- Jewish Virtual Library. (n.d.). Pikuach nefesh. In *Jewish Virtual Library: Jewish Concepts*. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/pikuach-nefesh>
- King James Bible* (1991). Thomas Nelson. (Original work published in 1769).
- Matar, N. I. (1987). Milton and the idea of the restoration of the Jews. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 27(1), 109-124. <https://doi.org/10.2307/450643>
- Milton, J. (n.d.-a). *Areopagitica: A speech of Mr. John Milton for the liberty of unlicens'd printing, to the Parliament of England* (T. H. Luxon, Ed.). The John Milton Reading Room. [https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading\\_room/areopagitica/text.shtml](https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/areopagitica/text.shtml) (Original work published 1644).
- Milton, J. (n.d.-b). *Paradise Lost* (T. H. Luxon, Ed.). The John Milton Reading Room. [https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading\\_room/pl/intro/text.shtml](https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/pl/intro/text.shtml) (Original work published 1667).
- Milton, J. (n.d.-c). *Samson Agonistes* (T. H. Luxon, Ed.). The John Milton Reading Room. [https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading\\_room/samson/drama/text.shtml](https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/samson/drama/text.shtml) (Original work published 1671).

- Milton, J. (n.d.-d). *The tenure of kings and magistrates* (T. H. Luxon, Ed.). The John Milton Reading Room. [https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading\\_room/tenure/text.shtml](https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/tenure/text.shtml) (Original work published 1650).
- Milton, J. (2011). *A treatise on Christian doctrine, compiled from the holy scriptures alone: Book 1, chapter 10*. The Newton Project. <https://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/view/texts/normalized/THEM00310> (Original work published 1825).
- Selden, J. (n.d.-a). *The historie of tithes that is, the practice of payment of them, the positive laws made for them, the opinions touching the right of them: A review of it is also annexed, which both confirmes it and directs in the use of it*. Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo;idno=A68720.0001.001> (Original work published 1618).
- Selden, J. (n.d.-b). *Table-talk, being discourses of John Seldon, Esq or his sense of various matters of weight and high consequence, relating especially to religion and state*. Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A59095.0001.001> (Original work published 1696).
- Soncino Babylonian Talmud* (I. Epstein, Ed. & Trans.). (1935-1952). Soncino Press.
- Stollman, S. S. (1972). Milton's understanding of the "Hebraic" in "Samson Agonistes." *Studies in Philology*, 69(3), 1972, 334–347. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173770>