

5 Samson's Revenge

There is in the human heart another passion as destructive as these, but somehow, in Yahweh's sight, more acceptable. It is the desire for revenge, in many ways the answer of the downtrodden to overbearing and dominating pride. It is a paradoxical force.

"Revenge is sweet", but it is also one of the most destructive of passions. It destroys souls and minds, eats away bodies and smashes communities into tiny warring fragments. The ruler holding his people together in loyalty and unity must know what to do about the passion for revenge. He must recognise its force and destructive power, and he must meet its demands with authority, or it will undo all his work.

The next expectation of trusting followers, when they have been defended and provided for, is revenge. If a ruler or leader is to keep his people together, he must give them satisfying revenge for all injuries, and deal out among them that quick justice which forestalls a more bloody retaliation. Justice, or judgement, giving proper and controlled revenge, is a duty and right of the ruler, and to understand the rule of God, we have to face the problem of revenge, which is the theme of the story of Samson.

In petty little ways, we all like revenge. If someone takes me down a peg, I'm delighted with the chance, when it comes, to deflate them. If someone gets the better of me in argument or competition, if an opponent outsmarts me, I smart indeed, until I have the chance of getting my own back. If ever I find I've been belittled or denigrated or upstaged, my hunger for revenge is savage, until I have evened the score. Revenge will justify actions I wouldn't normally stoop to. Normally, I wouldn't dream of cheating, but if someone has first cheated me, why shouldn't I do the same to them? I don't believe in gossiping and ruining people's reputations, but I'll think myself justified if it's someone who has been "talking about" me. I believe in loyalty and trust, but ever since my friend let me down so badly, I'm waiting for the chance to drop him right in it, and let him see how he likes it.

In films, revenge has become a box-office success. Think of those, like "The Sting", which begin with an innocent man cheated, and then with great relish tell the story of his cheating in revenge. Think of "The Magnificent Seven", of "The Odessa File" or "Death Wish": films whose heroes are engaged in swindling, lying, cheating, fighting, stealing, murdering. What makes it all acceptable is the motive of revenge. Our approval is secured at the start of the film, which vividly portrays the callous dishonesty and cruelty of the villains, so that we are soon thirsting for their blood and ready to cheer the man who takes it.

In "Death Wish", Charles Bronson plays a self-appointed vigilante who, after his wife and daughter are attacked and beaten up by New York muggers, takes to baiting muggers whom he shoots and kills. We are given all the right ingredients: the wife and daughter, both sweet, neat and pretty, in their snug apartment; the muggers, brash, mocking, unkempt and brutal; the bluff by which they trick their way into the apartment; and their

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sadistic violence. We're given statistics to show the impotence of the police, scenes at the station where the official upholders of the law grimly and frankly admit the unlikelihood of ever catching the offenders. After that, we feel justified in watching and enjoying mayhem and murder because the worm is turning and revenge is shown to be effective where the law was not. The vigilante kills seven or eight muggers and sparks off a wave of mugger bashing before the police track him down, and, anxious to avoid a total breakdown of official law and order, quietly persuade him to leave the city.

Popular enthusiasm for such acts,¹ redolent with satisfying revenge, is a reaction against another, more intellectual view, that has tried to remove all question of revenge from punishment, teaching us to look down on it as a base instinct. Correction or deterrence is believed to be a more defensible motive. We discipline a child, or put a thief in prison to make them better people and deter others from similar wrong behaviour. We hope to cure, or to warn, but we have tried to do away with any idea of revenge. Psychology and social studies have made us much more sympathetic about antisocial and criminal behaviour, and we are much more reluctant to put the blame squarely on the offender. Our intellectual leaders and our most successful reformers have told us to rise above the primitive justice of revenge, to something more enlightened, a more civilised approach to crime and punishment.

And they have had their success. Our courts are less concerned with destructive vengeance than they once were. But against this, there is a grass-roots reaction of those who will no longer deny their more animal instinct for revenge. A growing conviction that enlightenment has failed, that the law has become ineffective, that innocent victims are suffering without redress, is throwing people back more and more upon the straightforward, satisfying principles of revenge. "Bring back flogging and hanging." If you are a teacher, as I have been, you will know that many parents encourage their children to "defend themselves" by giving as good as they get. It is assumed that unless children are encouraged to hit or kick back, they'll be walked over and bullied. It isn't true, but many parents think it is, and teach their children that it is. Between the widespread enthusiasm for revenge entertainment, the intellectual and reformist disapproval of revenge, and popular lore, our society has a most ambivalent attitude.

The worst reactions are those that arise from frustration: the desire to see things put right and the despairing belief that there is no other way of bringing this about. Without law or leader to act for them, the injured and aggrieved lash out to injure in their turn and so redress the balance: evil for evil, hurt for hurt. A bitter and injurious balance it is: wherever there is evil or injury, there must be twice as much, to even the score. And

¹ Later, New Yorker Bernhard Goetz translated something of the film into reality. When he shot a number of youths who threatened him in a New York subway, his fellow citizens greeted it as long overdue retaliation from an all-too-long-suffering public. Since I wrote this passage the death penalty has made a vicious comeback in several American states.

that in theory. In practice we go further, an insult earning a blow, a punch earning a kick, a kick earning a broken bottle in the face or a savage beating up with a dozen onto one. Taking revenge seems to unleash deeper furies, as if we have to avenge all our life's insults and injuries at once, by completely destroying the enemy who as much as slights us.

As I write this, those "deeper furies" are being unleashed upon the helpless city of Beirut. Modern Israel is bombing and shelling, with little restraint, the Muslim section of the city, where her dispossessed enemy is trying to hold out. Revenge for attacks on Israel goes far beyond the number of casualties she herself has suffered over the years, and hundreds of civilians, as well as armed men, have been killed. Revenge is reinforced by fear, and by deeper memories provoking even deeper vengeance. The devastation of southern Lebanon, of Tyre and Sidon, the misery of refugees and now the bombing of Beirut are evidence of Israel's deep fear that mere revenge - tit for tat - would leave the enemy still able to retaliate, so that more than revenge must be taken. Vengeance and fear run too close together, and the spectre of Nazi Germany still looms too large in Israeli minds. Their leaders speak as if they are still smashing Hitler and Eichmann, betraying a bitterness that dwells on the past to refuel their wrath against the Palestinians. Confusing present and past enemies, they make the refugees in Lebanon liable to pay for all that the Jews have suffered in Europe.¹

A moment ago, I described revenge as an "animal instinct", and I was going to speak of the "Law of the Jungle". But that would be libellous against the Jungle, and animals, in fact, know nothing of revenge. They know fear, and how to defend themselves, how to keep their young or their territory. They kill to eat and to survive, but no animal takes revenge. With them there is no sense of bitterness or of a score to be settled, only hunger, territory and fear. The animal that has been hurt will remember it only as an instinct to fight when next it is threatened, or, if the odds are too great, to run away. When people fight to defend themselves, their young or their territory, when they kill to eat and survive, then they are sharing the life and law of the jungle, but when they go out for revenge, they are going beyond what the animals know, to rise above, or sink below the beasts.

For revenge depends upon a sense of justice or deserving: that the one who causes harm deserves to suffer it. It is a feeling for balance, a gut conviction that anyone who asserts himself to the harm of another is in the wrong and must pay to restore the balance. Without this balance, we feel that morality has no power or sanction, and that justice has lost by default. In the experience of vengeance, humankind parts company with the animals and shows itself to be both risen above and fallen below them. The conviction of justice and moral balance in which revenge has its roots is a spiritual one, rising above anything that a mere animal can experience. It has the deep spirituality not of the mind but

¹ This paragraph was written shortly before the atrocities at Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in Beirut.

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of the guts. And out of that conviction springs a passion that will drive a person to excesses of cruelty and savagery beyond anything an animal will commit. And if it does not so drive them, because they are prevented, it can eat them away from inside more horribly than the worst disease that ever attacks an animal. Its pain, frustration and bitterness can completely destroy a person: morally, mentally, physically. It is one of those experiences that show the human being to be a fallen creature: not merely an animal evolved to higher and better things, but a perverted creature fallen back below the animals, in the very qualities that raise it above them.

Revenge is a desperate act of self-assertion. When someone else has got away with hurting me, my "self" has been slighted and put down. To restore that self to its full stature I feel that I must reassert it and reaffirm its value, by inflicting injury where I have received it. And this, too, is a reason why revenge taps the "deeper furies". Most of us are so insecure, so uncertain of our "selves", so anxious about our identity and value, that if anything puts it in question, we over-compensate. We are not sure that merely giving as good as we got will sufficiently reaffirm our importance. We have to go on "giving" to reassure ourselves, as well as demonstrating to others, that we do matter and that we do count after all. "They won't get away with doing that to me."

Revenge is a human instinct - or the instinct of an intelligent, moral and emotional species. Perhaps you have seen the (now old) science fiction film "Forbidden Planet", which tells of a group of investigators on a strange, deserted planet that was once the home of the most advanced civilisation ever achieved. The whole vast machinery of this civilisation is still in perfect working order, but the population has disappeared without a trace. As far as can be ascertained, they seem to have been on the brink of their greatest achievement yet, an achievement which, according to the records deciphered, would have made any further advance quite unnecessary. And then, on the eve of perfection, they had disappeared. Down to the last soul of them they had perished, from no apparent cause. The only clue is that members of the exploring team themselves begin to be attacked and savagely torn apart by invisible monsters. It is an exciting and horrifying story, in which it is discovered, eventually, that the ancient people had not perished just before their crowning achievement, but immediately after it. They had built a complex of machinery capable of picking up instantly the mere wishes or desires of any member of the population. Then, drawing on virtually limitless reserves of energy in the planet's interior, it could move and reassemble matter anywhere on the planet, to put those wishes into immediate effect. Paradise indeed! But in one horrible night the whole population had been brutally murdered, for the machines had picked up and carried out faithfully every deep and repressed resentment, every bitterness and hidden grudge. Even unconscious desires for revenge had inspired the machine to create invisible monsters that tore apart the hated person. And there was no one who hadn't somehow, somewhere, given someone reason to hate or resent or fear them.

People often imagine God as the great and ultimate avenger. The God of vengeance whom we wrongly associate with the Old Testament is indeed a fearful god. "Vengeance

is mine" is the quote that comes to mind; for he is a god slow to forget and all-powerful to punish, a god made in our image and likeness, who sits in the sky, seething with bitterness, until he finally lashes out and strikes down in his wrath all who have offended. But as I said in the previous chapter, this is not the God of the Old Testament - or of the Book of Judges, which offers a much more realistic, more problematic and challenging view of vengeance, and its place in the relationship between God and people.

In the days of the heros, some Israelites came under the rule of the Philistines, a strong, well organised and aggressive people who, like the Israelites, had taken advantage of Egypt's decline to move in on Canaan, grabbing what territory they could. Coming from the sea, they soon controlled the coastal cities and plains, while the Israelites were still conquering the hill country inland. They had a stronger, more developed economy and eventually bid fair to take over the Israelite part of Canaan, as a growing urban and iron age power exploiting its superiority over disunited and backward hill tribes. But it was not Yahweh's intention to let his people be dominated. They were not to become a subjugated province of the Philistine nation, servants to the richer, more powerful civilisation, any more than they should bow to overbearing egoism among themselves.

The story to which we now come includes a good deal that is obviously folklore, but it is history in that it reflects the struggles of the time, and records something of what Israel then learned. It tells how, under this new oppression, they turned to Yahweh, who gave them an avenging hero in Samson, of the tribe of Dan. He was a man for such times: violent in his desires, in his strength and in his revenge. He would take no injury without double and treble revenge; no way would he brook refusal, and he could not acknowledge defeat - a dangerous man for a people who have come under powerful overlords, and have to bend the neck or perish. He was destined from before his birth to turn the tables for the Israelites, and his parents consecrated him to Yahweh. When he grew up, he was endowed with Yahweh's power: "The spirit of Yahweh began to move him in the camp of Dan."¹

We have been told how, in times of crisis, the heros of Israel like Gideon and Jephthah² received the "spirit of Yahweh", charismatic strength and confidence to carry out his purpose in defence of his people. In Samson's case, we are shown how that spirit of Yahweh works, within the heart of the man. It is not that God gives him, suddenly, virtue and wisdom and faith, but that he uses him for what he is, only greatly enhancing what he is, making his strong and violent qualities more real and permanent, so that they will last until Israel is made to stand up to the Philistines. Samson, as the one Israelite who refuses to be put down, becomes the instrument of God's intervention, but lives out to the bitter end his own violent and demanding nature.

Samson fell in love with a Philistine girl, and was determined to have her for his wife. He insisted on his parents arranging a marriage, and when they tried to persuade him to be satisfied with a woman from his own people, he was adamant: "Get this one for

¹ Jud. 13:5 ² Jud. 6:35; 11:29

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me; get her, because I like her."¹ The Book of Judges tells us that Yahweh was behind this, "seeking an occasion for quarrelling with the Philistines".²

And the occasion soon arose. The Philistines' instinctive fear of this strong and violent foreigner, and Samson's own furious temper, had the makings of a tragic feud. The marriage was arranged, but the cautious Philistines made sure they had him outnumbered thirty to one at the marriage feast, just in case there was any trouble. The celebrations - seven days of them - were under way, when Samson decided to amuse himself by setting his Philistine hosts a riddle, and betting them thirty best quality robes that they could not guess the answer before the festivities were over. On one of his visits, he had killed a lion in the nearby countryside, but he had told no one about it. Later, he had found a hive of bees settled in the carcass, and he had eaten some of their honey. This was the secret behind his famous riddle: "Out of the eater came what is eaten, and out of the strong came what is sweet."³

The Philistines, unable to guess his meaning, persuaded his bride to entice the answer out of him and pass it on, so that, on the seventh day, they had the riddle solved. Samson had to pay up, but he was not a good loser, especially as he guessed how they had cheated him. He went down to the nearby town of Ashkelon, killed thirty Philistines and took their robes to pay the debt. Then, "burning with rage, he returned to his father's house, and his wife was given to the Philistine who had been his best man."⁴

When he returned for her and found she was given away, he took revenge again by setting three hundred foxes, with lighted torches tied to their tails, loose in the Philistines' crops. For this disaster, the Philistines turned on his former wife and her family, burning them to death. Samson responded with an all-out attack on the Philistines, in which he caused great havoc. In return, the Philistines attacked the tribe of Judah and demanded they hand Samson over, since he was in their territory at the time. But when they did so, he broke the bonds with which they had tied him, snatched up a donkey's jawbone and killed "a thousand Philistines" in the fight that followed.

Eventually, Samson's weakness with women was his undoing. He was nearly captured while visiting a prostitute in Gaza, but he tore down the town gates and escaped. Then came his passion for Delilah, the story of which is well known. After several attempts, Delilah, who was in the pay of the Philistines, enticed out of him the secret of his strength: his hair, which had never been cut, was the sign of his consecration to Yahweh and the source of his strength. Lulled to sleep in Delilah's lap, he did not feel the Philistine barber cutting it off and when he woke he was already in their power. They took him prisoner, as helpless now as any one man, and put out his eyes.

¹ Jud. 14:3 ² Jud. 14:4 ³ Jud. 14:14 ⁴ Jud. 14:19-20

He was set to work as a chained slave, until one day they dragged him out as a public spectacle for their citizens to gloat over in the temple of Dagon, their god:

"Into our hands our god has delivered Samson our enemy, the man who laid our country waste, and killed so many of us." (Jud. 16:24)

But they had kept him too long. His hair and his consecration had grown again and he was ready to retaliate. Samson's last prayer to his god was for final revenge:

"Lord Yahweh, I beg you, remember me; give me strength again this once, and let me be revenged on the Philistines at one blow for my two eyes." (Jud. 16:28)

In his returning strength, he pulled down the building on all of them, killing himself in the ruin. The story ends with the comment: "Those he killed at his death outnumbered those he killed in his life."¹

This is a classic story of revenge: one wrong leading to another and worse one, until the vendetta finally drags both sides down to destruction. But it is also the story of an Israelite triumph over their enemies. What is surprising, at first sight, is the part that God himself plays, for again and again we are told that the "spirit of Yahweh" is the power behind Samson's actions.

It is this spirit, which is the breath or life of Yahweh, that first rouses Samson: "and the spirit of Yahweh began to move him in the Camp of Dan".² It is the spirit of Yahweh that gives him fantastic strength, as when he killed the lion: "The spirit of Yahweh seized on him, and he tore the lion in pieces as a man tears a kid."³ When his violent desire for revenge stirs within him, it is the spirit of Yahweh that drives him to action: "Then the spirit of Yahweh seized on him. He went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty men there."⁴ And in his first escape from the Philistines, "the spirit of Yahweh seized on him; the ropes on his arms became like strands of burnt flax."⁵

This awesome spirit of Yahweh that comes upon Samson is like a fit of enormous, uncontrollable strength and fury (a primitive fancy recently revived to fascinate young audiences, in the adventures of the "Incredible Hulk"). Possessing him through his

¹ Jud. 16:31 The story of Samson's death and its political background is unnervingly like that of the pilots who flew airliners into the World Trade Centre. A difference is that those pilots were not loners but were manipulated by an organised group. Nonetheless, it is much too close for comfort, and should make us very wary of any too simple reaction. Our "moral" indignation might itself have a great deal of the same cyclic revenge motif in it. If we think God is on our side when we bomb and shoot Afghans and Arabs, Egyptians or Pakistanis in revenge, we need to remind ourselves that we know God is on the side of Samson. (Added in 2002)

² Jud. 13:25 ³ Jud. 14:6 ⁴ Jud. 14:19 ⁵ Jud. 15:14

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consecration to Yahweh, it is a wild and terrible spirit, powerful in the extreme, and bringing out into full force the vengeance that is in him. For this spirit releases what is truly in a person's heart: if revenge is there, it will rush him on to the limits of revenge, and so achieve its own purpose; and if destruction is there, it will drive him on to final destruction. The spirit brings to light what is hidden, making thoughts and emotions more real, open and effective than we normally like them to be. The spirit of Yahweh takes away from us the veneer of prudence and civilisation, snaps the reins and frees the very thoughts of our heart to vent themselves in decisive action. It is like alcohol, but it does not drive you mad like alcohol. Samson is no drinker. He doesn't need wine to free him from his inhibitions - he has the spirit of Yahweh. When you are driven by this spirit, you really carry out what is in your thoughts, and can no longer disguise what you are, from yourself or from your neighbours. To come under the spirit of Yahweh is to come under judgement: a terrible public judgement in which your deepest thoughts turn into action in the light of day.

If Yahweh had left Samson alone, he might have lived more quietly. His parents might have been able to control him and he might have been more prudently aware of the danger he was rushing into. A respectable marriage and social pressures might have kept him in line - bitter and resentful perhaps, suffering inwardly from repressed desire and revenge, but constrained to be a law-abiding, submissive Israelite, and causing no excessive trouble to his friends or his Philistine overlords. And Israel with him might have remained submissive, eating out their own guts with resentment, but knuckling under to a hopeless new slavery, like that of their ancestors in Egypt.

But Yahweh did not leave them, or Samson, alone. He did not intend his people to accept domination, retreating into the role of a subservient, defeated minority. He did not mean them to bow to some decision of fate that the Philistines, stronger and more advanced, should rule over them. He did not want them to swallow their pride so that it festered inside their bellies and poisoned them. This would have suited the rising power of the Philistines, and, until Samson, it seemed they were able to get their way. But Yahweh did not intend to rule a mean-spirited and frightened minority. Rather, he would encourage them, strengthen them and lead them to throw off the yoke, and if the only one into whom he could breathe a spirit of resistance was a man of violent passions, selfish determination and vindictive temper, he would nonetheless raise up and strengthen such a man, rather than let his people fall leaderless into oblivion.

The tale of Samson is no allegory, but a story of God's dealing with his people, in which he shows himself no lover of cowardice: neither in his own people then, nor in the poor of our own day. He does not intend them to knuckle down under the might of powerful rulers, but to seek freedom and independence. No one has the right or the power to keep them bound when they are his. Neither fate nor force is to rule them. The strength of God is on the side of the oppressed who rise against their powerful oppressors and masters. The people of God are a free people: so much so that he is never far from their claims, even when they take a violent path to freedom. We have already seen that in accepting the revelation of Israel's God we have to accept that God supports the right of

the poorest to land - to a place they can truly call their own. We now see that he supports their right to hold that place in freedom, not as submissive minions, and that even violence in rebellion does not forfeit God's support: rather, it may well be his spirit that rouses their resistance, though violence is the only way they know of asserting it.

Of course, I am not saying that we have in the Book of Judges an adequate, Christian theology of liberation. Far from it. Even the most advanced parts of the First Testament leave something still to be said, and here we are dealing with one of the earliest. But it is fundamental. Whatever else we might learn about God, about his rule over us and his will for his people, he will not go back on this. No believer can, after Samson, claim that the downtrodden poor should passively accept their lot, especially in God's name. The story of Samson is a lasting challenge to any "pie in the sky" theology or any use of the Bible to protect unfair and oppressive governments from attack: even from violent and physical attack.

But it is no charter for starry-eyed revolutionaries either. It leaves us with no illusions about the effects of violence and revenge. When the oppressed rise up to take revenge, their own violence provokes violence. The blind fury of revolt will not bring peace, order or prosperity, even if it is successful. When bitterness has long been suppressed and hatred has festered, people lose the power of reason and self-control. Those who have long been silent and suffering may rise up when they can bear no more, but their violence may also be self-destructive. The French Revolution broke down in the Terror. The violent overthrow of Amin's dictatorship in Uganda left a country lawless, divided, shattered. The blacks of South Africa are being torn by their own violence, even as they struggle for the freedom God means them to have. In Northern Ireland, a population that seems to live and breathe on hate is destroying itself with its bitterly cherished resentments. The minority, with a history of repression and discrimination to feed their hatred, see violence as their only answer, when law and government are stacked or corrupted against them. But out of their violence, no one can construct a plan or a hope for the future: only revenge, more hatred, suicide, murder and further revenge¹.

God supports the oppressed, even when they have turned to violence, and even against a legally established oppressor. Under the rule of God, freedom is important and no legality, stability, patriotism or will of the majority, not even peace, can justify oppression. But violent opposition, even when successful, will be tragically destructive. We should not foolishly hope that a good new society will miraculously spring from the chaos and hatred of armed revolution. People whose hearts are twisted and spoiled by hate will not build the community God wants to rule.

I have said before how important it is to accept the Old Testament as a genuine revelation of God. That he could really be at work in events like those of Samson's life, siding with such primitive and violent people, takes us to the heart of his relationship with mankind.

¹ These two examples, of course, date from the 1980s.

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He cannot have been on Israel's side because they were morally enlightened, civilised, law-abiding or theologically right. It was no such quality that linked Yahweh and them. Rather, it was simply that he invited them, again and again, to trust him. He promised them that he was as much concerned as they were, and more so, for their freedom and security; that he valued them; that they were indeed his people and could trust him. His word to them was: "Trust me; depend on me, and you will find me reliable." Never mind that in depending on him they would inevitably depend on him for revenge, or that in trusting him they would only trust to see the blood of their enemies spilt. They would find out soon enough that revenge only recoiled on their own heads, and that as long as there was blood flowing, their own would flow with it. If, in the meantime, they learnt to trust him, they would perhaps trust him one day to enlighten them about such things as morality and civilisation.

This is why it is so important to see in these primitive stories the beginning of God's revelation. If we decide that they are too crude, too embarrassing to be genuine accounts of God's dealings with his people, except in a symbolic or allegorical sense, it will be because we feel that the first point of contact between God and people is at the level of good, civilised standards, acceptable morals, or at least genuine monotheistic religion. But it is not so. The first level at which God meets humankind, where Yahweh met Israel, is the level of trust. God offers his people the opportunity of trusting him, accepting him as leader. That is the first, fundamental and essential point of contact - not good or civilised behaviour, not enlightened ideas, but an offer, and trusting acceptance.

And that is just as well for us. For we still have it in us to hate and to kill, and it's good to know that God may deal with us as he dealt with Samson and the early Israelites. (There is a dark and distorted version of Judeo-Christian ethics which attempts to work by repression, imagining that God is pleased when we suppress within ourselves our fiercer and wilder drives. God is not. However God means to deal with our more destructive passions, it is not by clamping down on them. God would have the worst in us out in the open rather than locked and festering inside us. He does not repress the dark and uncontrolled things in our nature, but brings them into the light.) As with Samson, we may trust God to take us as we are. We don't have to kill off our primitive or sordid emotions in order to put our trust in God. We don't have to get rid of our tortured feelings in order to join God's side. It's the other way round. God asks us to trust him so that he can deal with our sins and turmoiled emotions. We don't become good and respectable so that he can come to us, but he comes to us to make us good, in his way (which may or may not include respectability). When we face squarely the scandal that God has revealed himself in such grisly settings as the Book of Judges describes, we begin to understand what his revelation is about. That God is God-with-us, where we are, asking us to trust him.

And there lies the risk - for, as we have seen, God is by no means safe. Where he takes us when we trust him may involve great pain and danger; certainly it will expose the full truth, for he is not a God of make-believe. We do not need to pretend in order to meet him, and when we have met him, we cannot pretend. Trusting him, we must not expect

to survive intact and in control, for unless we are already perfect, he will unearth in us emotions, powers, resentments, that only he can handle.

Samson trusted Yahweh, and violent and selfish though he was, Yahweh honoured his trust. He gave him strength and courage, using him to assert the independence of his people. Then, when Samson cried out to him in his last prayer, he heard him again, and enabled him to die in his own way, revenged. But Samson's way of bitterness and bloodshed is inevitably tragic. Trapped by his lust, and driven by his desire for revenge, his end is the only one possible: his own destruction with his enemies.

It is a tragic and wonderful story, beautifully told, and with true insight into the dark human heart where God wants to rule. There is no pretence in the Book of Judges. It does not resolve the problems it uncovers, but shows us, in truth, God at work in those problems. Here we see clearly what he is up against in establishing his relationship with Israel. The chariots of Egypt, the burning wilderness of Sinai and the walls of Canaanite towns were nothing - it is in the hearts of his people that God is really and earnestly at war.

Vengeance, like egoism, is destructive, but it is self-assertion at its best, with a taste for justice, demanding redress for injuries. It is a major theme of the Bible, a cry deep from the human heart, and since God's answer to it is paradoxical, it is well to learn that here, in Samson's story, his answer begins with a realistic appreciation of how it is and feels, and why.