Samson's "Thorn Bush" Tagging of Delilah Within Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949): Pricking One's Scriptural Conscience?

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Abstract

Legendary producer-director Cecil B. DeMille was a seminal cofounder of Hollywood, a progenitor of Paramount Pictures, and an unsung auteur who was not only an early pioneer of the religion-and-film genre but became the undisputed master of the American biblical epic. However, the many deftly engineered sacred subtexts, thematic preoccupations, and aesthetic skills of this movie trailblazer were frequently denied, derided or dismissed during his lifetime and decades thereafter. This situation is in need of re-examination, rectification and renewal. Consequently, following a close reading of *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and a selective review of the critical DeMille, film and religion literature, this article uses Delilah's (Hedy Lamarr) "thorn bush" tag, given to her during the wedding feast confrontation scene with Samson (Victor Mature), to explicate ten thorn bush themes that reveal some of the hidden depths of C.B.'s biblical artistry. Utilising textually-based humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens, this article concludes that DeMille was a far defter biblical filmmaker than has hitherto been appreciated. Further research into DeMille studies, biblical epics, and the religion-and-film field is warranted, recommended and already long overdue.

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1. DeMille: Master of the Biblical Epic

Legendary producer-director Cecil B. DeMille¹ (1881–1959), affectionately known as "C.B.", was a seminal cofounder of both Hollywood and Paramount Pictures (America's oldest existing film studio) who directed over seventy feature films during his career (Birchard, 2004; Cherchi Usai and Codelli, 1991; DeMille and Hayne, 1960; Edwards, 1988; Essoe and Lee, 1970; Eyman, 2010; Higashi, 1985, 1994; Higham, 1973; Koury, 1959; Louvish, 2008; Noerdlinger, 1956; Orrison, 1999; Ringgold and Bodeen, 1969). This film pioneer helped turn an obscure Californian orange grove into an international movie centre whose very name became the moniker for an entire artistic industry and an international synonym for success (see Figure 1). In short, DeMille was the "Golden Age of Hollywood summed up in a single man" (Mitchell, 1993, p.17).

Figure 1: DeMille addressing the audience of *The Ten Commandments* (1956)

During DeMille's long directorial career (1913–1956) he survived numerous personal catastrophes, professional challenges and techno-social changes, including the arrival of

sound films and colour films, the threat of television and wide screen cinema, fluctuating film fashions and demographic deviations, WWI and WWII, the Korean War and the Wall Street Crash (Winters, 1996). In the 1920s, DeMille's Bible films soothed the outrage of moral vigilantes following a series of salacious Hollywood scandals, notably comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle's rape and manslaughter trial, the unsolved murder of director William Desmond Taylor, and the drug addiction and death of the much-loved actor Wallace Reid (Anger, 1981, 1990). These and other scandals had earned Hollywood the moniker of the "Sodom of the Twentieth Century" (Revd. Edwin P. Ryland in Lindvall, 2001, p.282), which threatened the emerging industry's very existence.

DeMille "helped fashion the fundamental rules for the Classical Hollywood Narrative Style" (Gomery and Pafort-Overduin, 2011, p.71) and

introduced a number of innovations that later became standard in films: the listing of actors' names in on-screen credits, the use of proper sets rather than painted scenery for indoor scenes, and the use of extra lighting apart from the sun to emphasise certain aspects of the screen image (he called this "Rembrandt" lighting). He would also go on to invent the boom mike (Donnelley, 2010, p.355).

Not only was DeMille "The Father of Hollywood" (Kroon, 2010, p.337) – for some, "DeMille *was* Hollywood" (Freer, 2009, p.11) – but he also became "the undisputed master of the ancient-world epic" (Llewellyn-Jones, 2009, p.571), the "high priest of the religious genre" (Holloway, 1977, p.26), and the "King of the epic Biblical spectacular" (Finler, 1985, p.32). As Aubrey Malone succinctly, if cheekily, put it, adapting John 1:1²: "In the beginning was the epic, and the epic was with DeMille and the epic *was* DeMille" (2010, p.1).

His indelible biblical epics, *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927), *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and his second *The Ten Commandments* (1956), are cultural touchstones and biblical icons of the religion-and-film field that firmly established DeMille as America's "Sunday school teacher for the nation" (Beck, 2005, p.27). He was so successful in this endeavour that one anonymous Protestant church leader proudly proclaimed: "The first century had its Apostle Paul, the thirteenth century had St. Francis, the sixteenth had Martin Luther and the twentieth has Cecil B. DeMille" (Manfull, 1970, p.357). The movies became DeMille's medium for the propagation of scriptural events, ideas and values, and in doing so he transformed the dull, moribund genre of Bible films that were nominally aimed at "the religious" into dramatically entertaining art that excited both believers and non-believers.

2. Biblical Cinema and its Relations: A Basic Taxonomy

Biblical cinema has been an important genre since the birth of film (Campbell and Pitts, 1981; Lang, 2007; Reinhartz, 2013). Biblical cinema can be roughly divided into two “pure” categories (with various sub-categories) and four related categories that range from fidelity to the scriptural text into Bible-inspired fiction, as follows:

PURE CATEGORIES:

(1) Old Testament Films: These can be divided into two main sub-divisions:

(a) *The Pre-Monarchy Period* that clusters stories around (i) *Genesis* (e.g. Abraham, Adam and Eve, Jacob, Noah and the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah (Dixon, 2006; Kreitzer, 1994)); (ii) *God* (e.g. effulgent white light and disembodied voices (Bergesen and Greeley, 2000)); (iii) *Moses and the Exodus* (e.g. Moses’s birth and mission, the Israelite Exodus, parting of the Red Sea, receiving the Ten Commandments, and the making of the Golden Calf (Wright, 2003)); (iv) *The Time of the Judges* (e.g. Deborah, Gideon, and especially Samson with Delilah (Kozlovic, 2002))

(b) *The Time of the Kings, Prophets and Queens* (e.g. David, Esther, Jeremiah, Michal, Solomon (Exum, 1995)).

(2) New Testament Films: These focus upon biopics of Jesus (aka the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus Christ (Malone, 2012)), his rivals, precursors, companions and related others (e.g. the Apostles, especially Peter and Paul, Herod the Great, Judas Iscariot, Mary Magdalene, Salome, the Virgin Mary (Jewett, 1993; O’Brien, 2011)).

RELATED CATEGORIES:

(3) Apocrypha Films: These deal with ancient religious characters and stories told in texts that were not included in the mainstream biblical canon by all Jewish and Christian traditions but are still considered important by some faiths or groups (e.g. Book of Judith, Gospel of Thomas (Buchanan, 2013; Patterson, 2000)).

(4) Roman/Early Christian Interpolation Films: These focus upon the ancient world, but are only tangentially related to the canonical Bible (e.g., *Barabbas*, *Ben-Hur*, the prodigal son, Christ's robe, Christ's chalice (Jenkins, 2009)).

(5) Sacred Subtext Films: These usually focus upon "disguised" biblical characters in contemporary garb who exhibit the characteristics of their scriptural correlates (e.g., Christ-figures, Moses-figures, Job-figures (Baugh, 1997; Collet, 1983)), but in rarer cases, they also exist within biblical films (e.g., Samson as a Moses-figure (Kozlovic, 2009)).

(6) Biblical Extrapolation Films: These utilise biblical characters in fictionalised contexts beyond Bible events (e.g., angels, demons, the Devil/ Satan operating in contemporary society (Mitchell, 2002; Parish, 1994)).

3. The Cultural Value of *Samson and Delilah* (1949)

DeMille's biblical productions were public hits and commercially profitable, but his Old Testament Samson saga in particular was deemed a "watershed film" (Schatz, 1997, p.394) that triggered the 1950–60s flood of biblical epics. Even today, at least one Scripture scholar has argued that "the source of people's knowledge [of Samson—Judg. 13–16] is as likely to be Cecil B. DeMille's film *Samson and Delilah* as it is the biblical text" (McCann, 2002, p.92). According to ancient world cinema specialist and classicist, Jon Solomon, *Samson and Delilah* and *The Ten Commandments* (1956) "will be remembered as the most representative and iconographical Old Testament depictions of the twentieth century" (2001, p.175).

DeMille's sacred cinema successes were the direct result of his Judeo-Christian heritage and personal life-long study of the Bible inspired by his Episcopalian lay minister father (DeMille and Hayne, 1960, p.12). As his biographer Charles Higham noted: "far from being a cynic, [Cecil] was a devout believer in the Bible who saw himself in a missionary role, making the Scriptures attractive and fascinating to the masses in an age of increasing materialism and heathenism" (1973, p.x). He did this by deftly deploying the silver screen as his creative palette turned religious teaching tool.

DeMille had demonstrated a life-long commitment to the audio-visual Bible. In 1927 he argued that "Bible pictures will [give]...the outlines of the Old and New Testament stories in

briefest time with the greatest pleasure and delight and with the utmost reverence for the subjects and the arousing of the religious emotions” (DeMille, 1927, p.819). Whilst under oath in a court case, DeMille claimed that the religious theme, treatment and angle within his 1949 *Samson and Delilah* were very near to his heart and that he wanted as many people as possible to benefit from its teachings (Koury, 1959, p.209). Tellingly, his proselytising intent was clearly evident in a near-death admission: “my ministry was making religious movies and getting more people to read the Bible than anyone else ever has” (Orrison, 1999, p.108).

However, his on-screen evangelism was intimately linked to his business commitment to entertainment as an avowed pop culture professional (DeMille and Hayne, 1960, p.195). According to film historians Douglas Gomery and Clara Pafort-Overduin, “all Hollywood owed DeMille a debt for helping lead the way to an understanding of how to make films which would be popular around the world” (2011, p.72). Practising what he preached, DeMille made millions for Paramount’s purse from a paying public eager to consume his every offering.

4. The Decrying and Denying of DeMille

Yet, despite his numerous industry accolades and stellar career achievements (see Essoe and Lee, 1970, pp.245–47), DeMille was frequently denied, derided or dismissed by critics and commentators during his lifetime and decades after his death. For example, William Poster complained regarding *Samson and Delilah* (1949):

Everything in the film, dialogue, plot, acting is *ruthlessly*, and for the most part *tastelessly*, geared to the single effect of turbulent, sensual opulence...When you stop to think of the kind of décor, music, choreography, and writing such a picture could have and *doesn’t*, words are not strong enough to *condemn it*...The actors seem to have been selected for sheer visual richness *rather than* for dramatic ability or their relatedness to *any aesthetic conception* (1950 p.161) [my emphasis].

In 1960, designer Norman Bel Geddes argued that: “Inspirationally and imaginatively, CB was sterile. His stories, situations and characters were, almost without exception, unintelligent, unintuitive, and psychologically adolescent” (Green, 1997, p.191). Film biographers, Leatrice Gilbert Fountain and John Maxim accused DeMille of creating “title lines such as no human being ever spoke” (1985, p.75). Elsewhere commentators claimed that

DeMille “lacked a creative genius” (Kardish, 1972, p.133), his films were “valueless” (Jacobs, 1968, p.342), and so “the exploitive mix of piety and prurience in De Mille epics is best forgotten” (O’Brien, 1990, p.186).

And yet, as Simon Louvish noted: “The curious, and somewhat stunning, fact of the life in art of Cecil B. DeMille is that most of his best, most intriguing, most masterfully crafted and indeed amazing movies remain invisible and unknown, even to film buffs who were brought up on the legendary sagas of this iconic movie-maker” (2008, p.xv), thus making C.B. “Hollywood’s best known unknown” (Arthur, 1967b, p.283). Even today he “rarely receives the serious academic recognition and study that he deserves” (Smoodin, 2000, p.251), despite having repeatedly demonstrated a “sophistication unparalleled in American cinema” (Pittenger, 2011, p.147). This academic oversight is in need of re-examination, rectification and renewal. One pathway towards the rehabilitation of DeMille’s professional reputation is by revealing the many trade secrets of this legendary filmmaker.

5. Introducing Cecil’s Samson Saga

To begin to address this academic deficiency, I have selected DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* (1949) for analysis. This Technicolor testament has previously been overlooked by academia, comparatively speaking, but has recently been hailed by biblical studies professor Cheryl Exum as “a masterpiece of biblical film making” (2002, p.255) that almost rivals DeMille’s 1956 *magnum opus*, *The Ten Commandments*.

DeMille’s Samson saga, starring Victor Mature as Samson and Hedy Lamarr as Delilah, has been described by contemporary commentators as a “lavish biblical epic of lust, betrayal and bulging biceps that literally brings the house down” (O’Brien, 1998, p.34). Its fabulous financial success in its day allowed DeMille-the-businessman to keep “the famous [Paramount] iron gates open and the ledgers in the black, when TV was killing off lesser studios and frightening the hell out of those that remained” (Henry Wilcoxon in Orrison, 1999, p.4). As fellow movie mogul Darryl F. Zanuck enviously claimed: “*Samson and Delilah* is basically a sex story and when you can get one in biblical garb apparently you can open your own mint” (Gussow, 1971, p.81).

I have selectively reviewed and integrated the critical literature on DeMille, film and religion into this paper utilising textually-based humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens (Bywater and Sobchack, 1989, chpt. 2). This frequently under-

utilised film analysis methodology is applicable to all genres ranging from science fiction (Telotte, 2001, chpt. 2) to literary autobiography (Johnson, 2007). Its main pedagogic function is to identify noteworthy incidents and foster critical commentary rooted in primary sources (e.g., the nominated movie(s)) and secondary sources (e.g., memoirs, autobiographies, film journals); and focusing especially upon the tracking and interpretation of themes, motifs, symbols, and other construction secrets, tropes and topoi. Consequently, this analytical methodology is tailor-made for exploring DeMille's biblical cinema craftsmanship. But before beginning the analysis, I will briefly review the plot of *Samson and Delilah* and highlight those moments taken directly from the Bible or creatively crafted by DeMille when he had to make *explicit* what may only have been *implicit* (or missing) within Holy Writ.

6. The Story of *Samson and Delilah*

At the opening of the film, God's people are dominated by the cruel Philistines because, "Israel did evil again in the sight of the Lord" (Judg. 13:1). DeMille does not include the biblical incidents of Samson's barren mother being approached by an angel of the Lord and announcing the forthcoming birth of her saviour son, or his subsequent Nazarite instructions (e.g., avoiding wine and unclean things; not cutting his hair), or the disbelief of her husband, Manoah, and the subsequent recall and testing of the messenger angel before she miraculously gave birth (Judg. 13:1–25). However, some hints of these facts are provided in subsequent dialogic exchanges scattered throughout the film.

DeMille starts his story with Samson (Victor Mature) fully grown, the Danite Hebrew Judge of his people and the strongest man in the world, blessed by the Lord (Judg. 13:24–25). He then adds a romantic backstory that artfully weaves together scriptural facts and logical plot extrapolations that make sense given the customs, times and story locations. For example, Samson eschews his kinswoman, Miriam (Olive Deering), not mentioned in the Bible but a plausible marriage candidate according to religio-political custom. Instead, Samson wants to marry a Philistine woman whom DeMille names Semadar (Angela Lansbury), who is promised to the Philistine military governor, Ahtur (Henry Wilcoxon). Samson's choice of a Philistine woman is told in Judg. 14:1–3, but that woman is unnamed, and Ahtur does not feature at all.

Semadar's younger sister, Delilah (Hedy Lamarr), wants the handsome Samson for herself, and so seeks to romantically ensnare him. Delilah appears in Judges 15, but she is not related to or competing with Semadar in the Bible's version of the story. In DeMille's version, Samson kills a young lion bare-handed during a hunt (Judg. 14:5–6) and offers the unblemished skin to the Saran of Gaza (George Sanders), who reciprocates this generosity by granting him the hand in marriage of a willing Semadar, which upsets both Ahtur and Delilah.

During the pre-marriage wedding feast (Judg. 14:10), Samson proposes an unbeatable riddle to his bothersome Philistine guests (Judg. 14:12), but the guests threaten Semadar, she tricks Samson (Judg. 14:15), the guests discover the answer and Samson loses the competition. Peeved, he steals thirty Philistine garments to pay his debt (Judg. 14:19). While he is away, Semadar's father Tubal (William Farnum) marries Semadar to Ahtur (Judg. 14:20), which greatly upsets Samson when he returns, garment-laden. Delilah is quickly offered as a replacement bride (Judg. 15:2) but Samson defiantly refuses (Judg. 15:3). A major fight erupts resulting in Philistine deaths, the demise of Semadar and Tubal, and the fiery destruction of their beautiful house (Judg. 15:6), leaving Delilah homeless. Again, this detail is not scripturally based – the biblical Delilah is not introduced until sometime after the death of Samson's first wife.

Samson is now a Philistine outlaw, reaping furious revenge (Judg. 15:4–5, 8). However, his kinsmen, the men of Judah, are upset by his outlaw ways (DeMille showcases crippling tax burdens placed upon them), so they bind a willing Samson and hand him over to the Philistines (Judg. 15:11–13). But Samson later breaks free, slaughters numerous soldiers using the jawbone of an ass (Judg. 15:14–17), and begins a new reign of terror with the young boy, Saul (Russ Tamblyn), as his sidekick (unscriptural, but aimed at the youth segment of DeMille's audience).

DeMille leaves out the biblical scenes of God miraculously providing a thirsty and demanding Samson with water after the Philistine slaughter (Judg. 15:18–20), or Samson's subsequent visit to an unnamed "harlot" (Judg. 16:1) in Gaza, and later his stealing of the gates of Gaza after midnight (Judg. 16:2–3). However, DeMille makes dialogic reference to Samson's womanising habits in his family-friendly film via a conversation between Philistine soldiers at the village water well early in the story, whilst his gate-stealing prowess was noted by Delilah while Samson is shorn, captured and chained at Delilah's oasis love-nest.

Unable to stop the deadly Samson militarily (scripturally unstated but logically implied in Judg. 16:2–3), the Philistine lords enlist the services of Delilah (Judg. 16:5), now the Samson's erotic partner (not scripturally stated), to find out the secret of Samson's strength, which she cunningly does (after failing three times) using seduction and persistence during their oasis encounters (Judg. 16:6–17). The secret is, of course, Samson's hair. Finally fatigued, seduced and sedated, Samson's curls are cut, he is rendered weak, captured, bound and blinded by the Philistines who take him away to toil in a Gaza grist mill (Judg. 16:21), where his hair slowly grows back (Judg. 16:22).

This little weak woman has conquered the strongest man in the world, but Delilah is still in love with Samson, experiences restlessness and regret, and then has a profound conversion experience (not scripturally stated). When the pitiful Samson is brought to the temple of Dagon for public mockery (Judg. 16:23–25), Delilah publicly rejects the Samson and willingly sides with Samson (not scripturally stated) as he prays to God (Judg. 16:28). He miraculously topples the main support pillars (Judg. 16:27, 29–30), which collapses the temple, killing Samson, the majority of the Philistine crowd (Judg. 16:30), and Delilah, albeit unwittingly. In the biblical account, Delilah is not present during this scene; instead, Samson is aided by an unnamed Philistine servant. At the film's end, Miriam and Saul mourn Samson's passing (Judg. 16:31), but his people are now much freer than before because of his heroic act of self-sacrifice (Judg. 13:5).

7. The Critical Incident: Samson's Confrontation with Delilah

I argue here that a good indication of the depth of DeMille's filmmaking mastery is deftly demonstrated when his peeved Samson describes the devious Delilah as a "thorn bush" during their wedding feast confrontation scene (see Figure 2). This aesthetic tactic was only one of many that DeMille deployed to deepen the scriptural potency and theological resonance of his biblical storytelling, but to date this particular insult has been overlooked by film critics.

Figure 2: Tubal, Delilah and Samson

During the pre-marriage wedding festivities at the Philistine house of Tubal, the Hebrew Samson is tricked out of his Philistine wife-to-be, Semadar, who is subsequently given in marriage to the Philistine Ahtur, his romantic, religious, ethnic and political rival. The love-struck, opportunistic Delilah (Semadar's younger sister) sees a golden opportunity to ensnare Samson as her husband and so she cunningly manipulates Ahtur and his Philistine companions, then manoeuvres her fretting father, Tubal, into formally offering her to Samson as his new, and more beautiful, replacement bride.

Despite Delilah's eagerness and Tubal's honey words describing the virtues of this "rare blossom" to placate Samson and forge a new marriage contract, Samson passionately rejects Delilah, claiming that "she will grow into a thorn bush". This stinging "thorn bush" tag was immediately accepted and twice repeated by the angered and deeply humiliated Delilah during her own passionate rebuttal. However, this particular botanical tag, and on-screen incident, is not recorded within Judges 13–16 (or elsewhere). So why did DeMille equate Delilah with a thorn bush, out of all the potential word-images that he could have used to express Samson's anguish and feelings of betrayal (whether personal, familial, ethnic, political or religiously based)?

Not only did DeMille invent the "thorn bush" tag, but he employs it three times. This fact alone warrants textual exegesis since saying something three times is a typical linguistic strategy to engineer emphasis via repetition, as well as being a common scriptural strategy used to "represent fulness or completeness" (Owen, Grist and Dowling, 1992, p.115). His choice of verbal tag is particularly interesting because at the first story conference between himself and his scriptwriters (held 19 July 1946), DeMille had initially imagined the mood of

this rejection scene as follows: “Looking for a minute at the younger daughter [Delilah] he [Samson] evidently said, “Oh, nuts! Take that little thing away”” (Koury, 1959, p.216).

I contend that DeMille’s botanically-themed “thorn bush” tag was not accidental or incidental or another unthinking example of biblical ersatz, but rather, it was a deliberate dialogue choice firmly rooted in DeMille’s idiosyncratic history and professional filmmaking praxis aimed at multi-level meaning-making. DeMille’s “thorn bush” tag with its various scriptural corollaries reinforces the idea of Delilah as a prickly pain in Samson’s side, and encourages viewers to contrast her behaviours with Samson, Semadar, the Saran, Miriam, and others. This botanical dialogic phrase is thick with religious meaning (but not to be confused with scientific botanical nomenclature)³ that strengthens DeMille’s sacred storytelling for believers, thus refuting Dennis DeNitto’s claim that DeMille’s “ideas on religious faith are shallow” (1985, p.5).

After all, DeMille was the son of an Episcopal lay reader and regularly heard stories from the Old and New Testament during his childhood (DeMille and Hayne, 1960, p.28). This domestic reality helped C.B. become a life-long Bible student (Arthur, 1967a, p.224) who was cognisant of the Holy Scripture’s use of sacred symbols, signs, motifs, metaphors, themes and allusions to convey its theological messages. For example, “repetition is a prominent literary device in Hebrew narrative” (Chisholm, 2009, p.180), and DeMille the lay biblical scholar liked to emulate that device within his Bible films – including the repeated “thorn bush” tag.

In addition, DeMille’s “research department was legendary within the industry” (Seville, 1993, p.50). Researchers included notable investigator Dr. Henry Noerdlinger, whose input was almost as great as the scriptwriters’ (Eldridge, 2006, pp.145–51). DeMille’s broad biblical knowledge and demanding research efforts were coupled with his intense control predilections as a veritable “Script Dictator” (Jesse L. Lasky Jr. in Orrison, 1999, p.37) for whom “even the choice of words, pronunciation and enunciation are insisted upon, to get the ‘just right’ time and facial expression” (Slide, 1994, pp.184–85). As Phil Koury put it: “DeMille, more than any producer, sired his plots and was keen to every little nuance in them” (1959, p.204). Even when his writers tried to erase lines that they thought were stinkers, he would just re-insert them (Server, 1987, pp.26, 28).

DeMille exerted such strict control to ensure that *his* authorial voice dominated (and was not diluted, side-tracked or derailed), thereby protecting his carefully crafted formulation of image, dialogue, and Scripture. After all, his scriptwriters were not as well versed in the Bible, its imagery, symbolism or ramifications as DeMille-the-lay-biblical-scholar, whose

depth of religious insight is illustrated by the following ten scriptural resonances associated with Delilah's "thorn bush" tag.

8. Ten Thorn Bush Themes: One Pricking at a Time

Theme One – Thorns as Painful Trouble and Sorrow: The thorn tag accurately predicted Delilah's future damaging role as the proverbial pointed pain in Samson's side. Biblically speaking, thorns are associated with trouble, such as "thorns in your sides" (Num. 33:55), "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7) and the "grieving thorn" (Ezek. 28:24). Indeed, within "much of Scripture, thorny shrubs are used as images of divine judgment... In much of later iconography, the thistle or the thorn is the symbol of earthly sorrow (based on the pronouncement against Adam in Gen. 3:17–18)" (Tischler, 2006, p.495). Therefore, it was divinely advised that: "Thorns and snares are in the way of the froward: he that doth keep his soul shall be far from them" (Prov. 22:5), and "that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned" (Heb. 6:8).

Correspondingly, DeMille's Delilah's pained Samson via her annoyance, treachery, obsessive love, jealousy, betrayal and abandonment that eventually leads to his (and her) death. When Samson had dramatically rejected her, he profited greatly against the Philistines; but when they reconnected at the oasis love-nest trap, she ensnared him. Their romantic entanglement led Samson to lose his God-based support, and subsequent Philistine capture, blindness, imprisonment, humiliation, physical agony, and crushing death under Dagon's toppled temple (Judg. 16:29–30). This ending is similar in sentiment to the seed of the sower in Jesus' parable which "fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it" (Luke 8:7; see also Luke 8:14; Matt. 13:7, 22; Mark 4:7, 18–19).

Delilah's "thorn bush" tag was also dramatically appropriate for DeMille because it counterpointed Tubal's reference to Delilah as a "rare blossom" that prompts Samson's thorny retort – setting up a poetic binary of opposite extremes. Interestingly, when Ahtur visits Semadar (and the trespassing Samson) in Tubal's garden, he gives her a warrior's spear as a personal present saying: "I brought you a thorn for a rose". DeMille had thus engaged in another thorn-flower binary that parallels and prefigures the "rare blossom"- "thorn bush" appellation between Tubal and Samson at the wedding feast.

Indeed, when Ahtur associates "thorn" with a spear/ weapon/ deadly pain, it prefigures Semadar causing Samson pain by treacherously revealing his unbeatable riddle answer to the Philistine wedding guests. This in turn prompts her thorn-like pricking death by flying

Philistine spear, an intense source of sorrow for Samson (Judg. 15:6). Since this spear was the physical means of her death (see Figure 3), but *not* scripturally stated within Judges 13–16, one surmises that this plausible prop was another DeMilleean attempt to prolong the thorn-pain theme.

Figure 3: A Battling Samson and a Speared Semadar

Theme Two – Thorns as Clinging Ensnarement: A thorn physically ensnares its victim via piercing, which is painful and usually hard to dislodge (Job 41:2; Judg. 8:7). Similarly, DeMille's Samson is physically ensnared by the revenge-filled Delilah (see Figure 2), in an encounter which was rendered on-screen as follows:

Delilah: Did a thorn bush steal a chariot that took you to the lion? Did a thorn bush tell the Saran how you killed it with your bare hands? No, I did! And he believed me, then you chose Semadar.

[Delilah digs her delicate fingers into Samson's clothes to desperately grab him].

Samson: Take your claws out of me.

Delilah: You'll never get them out of you.

Not only does this scene verbally reinforce the clinging thorn bush theme (along with a clawing lion resonance), but it also allows Delilah to reinforce Samson's derogatory thorn tag whilst in the very process of rejecting that tag. It also accepts the tag directly by physically demonstrating, in a symbolically resonate manner, the grasping powers of a thorn through

Delilah's clinging behaviour and digging finger movements. Overall, DeMille had stated the word/ concept, demonstrated the concept, and symbolised the concept in another deft artistic act of multi-level meaning-making.

Theme Three – Thorns as Fruitlessness: The Bible uses thorns to symbolise fruitlessness, notably in Jesus' words: "Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?" (Matt. 7:16). Therefore, the thorn symbolically tags Delilah as undesirable. DeMille's Delilah desires to wed Samson, but her goal is ultimately fruitless for they never married, either according to Scripture or DeMille. Delilah was also fruitless for a second time because she never bore Samson any children (legitimate or otherwise), despite their intimate liaisons later on as re-connected former rivals – possibly another sore point for them during their dark days of despair.

Theme Four – Thorns as Conflagration Source: Delilah-as-thorn-bush deliberately fanned the flames of discontent at Samson's wedding feast, which thematically referenced another unique biblical thorn resonance. In Psalm 58:9, thorns provided a popular quick-burning fuel to heat pots. In Exodus 22:6, thorns represent fire hazards alongside dry standing grain during harvest time. Such thorns could cause an entire field to catch fire. This dangerous reputation resonates with the fire-starting actions of Delilah-the-mischievous-hostess.

There is no scriptural reference to the timing of Samson's wedding feast, but DeMille indicated the season when Delilah verbally promised the Saran: "I will deliver Samson to you before the month of harvest". This timeframe was visually indicated when Samson set the Philistine's fields on fire in retaliation for Semadar's death. The burning field had bundles of dry grain stacked up high (typical harvest time iconography) and Samson-the-vengeful-arsonist had apparently pulled one of them apart to feed that fire. DeMille then jump cuts to Delilah (along with her despondent servant Hisham) situated upon a slightly raised platform on the border of the burning field watching her house afire in the distance. In the bottom, left-hand corner is some denuded flora suggestive of a thorn bush in front of burning grain (see Figure 4). Delilah-the-symbolic-thorn-bush was placed next to a field of dry standing grain, which is now on fire as a partial consequence of her own incendiary actions. This suggests that DeMille directly borrowed this scene from Exodus 22:6: "If fire break out, and catch in thorns, so that the stacks of corn, or the standing corn, or the field be consumed therewith; he that kindled the fire shall surely make restitution". Samson subsequently made restitution with his life at film's end, as did Delilah, the wily schemer behind Samson's transgressions.

Figure 4: Thorn Bush, Flames, Delilah and Hisham

Theme Five – Thorns as Punishment: The Bible also uses thorns to symbolise punishment, as when God made Adam and Eve suffer for disobeying him in Eden and used thorns as part of their post-eviction punishment: “Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee” (Gen. 3:18), and again regarding Israel’s punishment: “the thorn and the thistle shall come up on their altars” (Hosea 10:8). Conversely, troublesome thorns are quickly replaced when experiencing God’s favour (Isa. 55:13). Samson was God’s chosen deliverer (Judg. 13:5), but he broke many of his sacred Nazarite vows. Therefore, it could be argued that Delilah entered Samson’s life and later defeated him as divine punishment for Samson disobeying God (i.e. Delilah as the thorny instrument of God’s justice).

Delilah also provided the incendiary trigger for other incidents of punishment. For example, Tubal and Semadar (Delilah’s kin according to DeMille) were killed at the wedding feast disaster and their house is burned to the ground. Semadar lay dead inside, Tubal was still alive, stunned but with an unverified fate at that time. According to Delilah’s dialogue to the Saran later in the film, he must have died off-screen because she said: “When my father and sister lay dead in the ashes of our home, because of Samson, he laughed at my tears”. A Paramount synopsis sheet of *Samson and Delilah* states: “Seeing her father and sister dead in the ashes of her home” (dated 1959, p.3, private collection), verifying their filmic demise in accordance with Judges 15:6. This devastating event was even dialogically prefigured by one of DeMille’s Philistine wedding guests, who yelled out during the deadly melee, “Burn her and her father in the fire”.

Prior to these fiery deaths, the servant Hisham (Julia Faye) was aware of Delilah's mischievous plotting and said to her regarding her machinations during the wedding feast, "The trouble you brew today you'll drink tomorrow", thus engaging in her own prophetic foreshadowing (which came true). Hisham's cautionary words to Delilah also mirrored the negative payback sentiment stated in Jeremiah 12:13, namely "They have sown wheat, but shall reap thorns", thereby associating thorns with God's punishment yet again (see also Isa. 9:18; 10:17; Ps. 118:12).

On a higher metaphysical level, Delilah-as-thorn could also be legitimately interpreted as a divine instrument of God's will because her treacherous role was crucial in allowing Samson to be captured. The Philistine circus associated with Samson's capture, blinding and public mocking had enticed over 3,000 Philistines to gather in one place to be efficiently killed under Dagon's toppled temple (Judg. 16:25–30). This enticement tactic was spectacularly successful: "the dead which he [Samson] slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life" (Judg. 16:30). This deadly destruction was in accordance with God's mission for Samson's earthly life: "he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines" (Judg. 13:5). If it was not for Delilah, Samson would not have been captured and provide a boon for his nation, in much the same way that Judas was needed to betray Jesus whose death (in Christian theology) provided a cosmic boon for all humankind (Matt. 1:21; Rev. 1:5).

Theme Six – Thorns as a Reminder of Satanic Evil and Danger: In 2 Corinthians 12:7, the Apostle Paul referred to "a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me". In *Samson and Delilah*, with her burning home in the background, Delilah-the-thorn-bush stood next to the burning field and vowed unholy vengeance against Samson, saying "He's going to feel its sting" straight after Hisham had reminded her that "He called you a fork-tongued adder". The trouble, danger and pain springing from a viper bite and a thorn bush scratch (a pain-in-the-flesh reminder from Satan) jibed well together, especially considering that in midrashic interpretation "the thorn bush is the prickliest of all trees and any bird that goes into it does not come out unscathed" (Knight, 1999, p.169). Likewise, Samson did not escape his encounter with his female nemesis unscathed.

Delilah is also compared to a bird on two separate occasions within *Samson and Delilah*. Firstly, she was linked to a dove when Tubal claimed at the wedding feast, "See the whiteness of her skin, *smooth* as a young dove's", which was colourfully reinforced elsewhere when the Saran of Gaza referred to Delilah's "white arms". And secondly, when Delilah

employed the image of a “dove” to refer to her emotional devastation and powerlessness via her passive lament following the destruction of her home and family, namely: “greater than a lion’s and softer than a dove’s”. This event itself resonated with the biblical descriptions of “harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16) and a “silly dove” (Hos. 7:11). DeMille’s Delilah was beautiful with soft white skin, but acted in a silly way (a sign of obsessive romantic love). She was physically harmless compared to Samson-the-Hebrew-Hercules, but a thorny pain in his side nonetheless.

DeMille’s Delilah also suffered emotional torment and an easily avoidable death when she stayed behind with Samson as he toppled Dagon’s temple near film’s end (see Figure 5). Her Delilah-as-dove dramatic construction had been damaged by her Delilah-as-thorn bush binary opposite, and she suffered two forms of pain because of it, physical and psychological. A dove is the biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32) or more crudely put, good/ God’s side, as opposed to the thorn/ evil/ Devil/ bad/ Satan’s side. Referring to Delilah as a dove is possibly another multi-layered DeMilleian attempt to emphasise the binaries of good versus evil, God versus Satan, dove versus thorn, physical pain versus psychological pain, and life versus death.

Figure 5: Samson Toppling Dagon’s Temple

However, Delilah’s emotional vacillation and death in Dagon’s temple according to DeMille is not scripturally recorded. In Judges 16, Delilah betrayed Samson, took her money from the Philistine lords, and that is the last we hear of her; she suffers a textual death. Nevertheless, some Christian commentators “suspect [that] she went to the Philistine temple of Dagon, where Samson had been put on display before 3,000 people” (Trigilio Jr. and

Brighenti, 2005, p.214). More importantly, her on-screen fate was a logical consequence of her thorn bush tag and subtextual character construction by DeMille.

Even if the Bible is silent about Delilah's fate, DeMille's extrapolation of scriptural events was at least within the bounds of biblical plausibility according to *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*: "She even may have been one of the 3,000 Philistines buried beneath the temple of Dagon which Samson destroyed when his God-given strength returned (Judg. 16:27–30)" (Lockyer, 1986, p.293). Other popular Christian commentators have agreed saying: "Delilah, no doubt, among them" (Guthridge, 1995, p.23; see also Trigilio Jr. and Brighenti, 2005, p.215). It is possible that these biblical commentators were strongly influenced by DeMille's classic movie; if so, this provides further evidence of his powerful impact upon the popular religious consciousness decades after his death.

Theme Seven – Thorns as Nonlethal Discomfort and Lowliness: A small lowly thorn implies painful discomfort, but not death. The diminutive Delilah-as-thorn was certainly a painful discomfort to Samson, but she did not actively seek his death, whether directly or indirectly. Scripturally speaking, nowhere in the Philistine-Delilah negotiations was death mentioned. Instead: "And the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and said unto her, Entice him, and see wherein his great strength lieth, and by what means we may prevail against him, that we may bind him to afflict him: and we will give thee every one of us eleven hundred pieces of silver" (Judg. 16:5). Old Testament scholar James L. Crenshaw suggested that "On the basis of this language, and subsequent narrative material, we must conclude that the Philistines wanted to expose Samson to painful and humiliating bondage over a period of time. In this way they would savor the taste of victory for years to come" (1978, p.93) rather than the fleeting gratification that capital punishment would provide.

DeMille likewise honoured this tradition of the painful humiliation of Samson, for his Delilah firmly claimed, "I will learn the secret of his strength" so that "the people [can] mock him and make sport of him", but with the (unscriptural) provision that when captured, "no drop of his blood shall be shed, no blade shall touch his skin". DeMille's Delilah also wanted to savour her victory. Even when DeMille depicted a religiously motivated Philistine demand, "By the sacred pillars of the temple we demand his death!" (which prefigured the pillar-crashing event to come—Judg. 16:29–30), Delilah defiantly countered it by demanding: "I want his life!" until he "draws his breath in agony and every word he speaks is a prayer for death" (prefiguring Samson's death prayer to come—Judg. 16:28, 30). The Philistine lords unanimously agreed.

DeMille depicted an extra-canonically weak, lowly and powerless young Delilah who long ago romantically flicked plum pits at Samson in Tubal's garden. Tubal even asked her at the wedding feast, "Why aren't you entertaining the wedding guests?", thus indicating that her duties were as a daughter and servant (but currently amiss). Since Samson was the archetypal strongman, Delilah's small-framed lowly womanliness was emphasised by the contrast. Moreover, interpreted by DeMille as the second daughter of Tubal, the younger sister of Semadar (who does have a younger sister in Judg. 15:2, but who is not identified), Delilah's lowly status was further indicated by her filmic birth order. This was not done very successfully from a casting point of view because Angela Lansbury was about 24 years old at the time while Hedy Lamarr was about 36 (born 1925 and 1913 respectively—see Katz, 1980, pp.690 & 679), but this age difference was not fatal to the film's credibility.

Samson's DeMille reference to Delilah-as-thorn-bush also had unique scriptural associations for Jewish viewers. In traditional midrashic interpretation, a thorn bush is "the lowliest of all trees in the world" (Knight, 1999, p.169). Delilah was a woman, so in the patriarchal, androcentric, misogynistic, male-centred world of the Bible she was culturally lower in social status and thus less worthy than a man. After the massacre at Samson's wedding feast, Delilah's destitution, lowly status and powerlessness was emphasised again as she and Hisham watched their burning crops and house, with Hisham despairingly asking: "What strength can these [Delilah's] hands have against him [Samson]?", "a dove against a bull" according to a Philistine lord later on. As it turned out, the powerlessness of Delilah's beautiful dove-like body did indeed defeat Samson, "the lion of Dan".

Theme Eight – Thorns as Jesus and Moses Reminders: Samson's reference to a thorn bush also resonated with Jesus (the ultimate Christian hero) when he wears a crown of thorns at his crucifixion (Matt. 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2, 5), and its associated visual iconography throughout Christendom as a symbol of holy suffering and cruelty, which DeMille had filmed in his 1927 *The King of Kings* (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Jesus Wearing His Crown of Thorns

Furthermore, thorns resonated with another pivotal moment and person in biblical history, namely Moses (the ultimate Jewish hero) and the burning bush through which God revealed himself (Exod. 3:2). Many have identified this burning bush as a thorn bush (Knight, 1999, p.169), making the thorn a nature symbol of forthcoming radical change. This divinely-infused speaking thorn bush was the communication medium of forthcoming monumental change and pain, in much the same way that the speaking Delilah-as-thorn was also the communication medium of forthcoming monumental change and pain.

Although DeMille did not screen the burning bush scene in his 1923 *The Ten Commandments*, screening even part of the Moses saga indirectly evokes the backstory of his burning bush encounter with the Divine that initiated Moses's earthly mission. However, DeMille did feature the burning bush in his 1956 *The Ten Commandments* (see Figure 8), and so any post-1956 audiences of *Samson and Delilah* (1949), or those studying his biblical *oeuvre*, would more strongly make the link between these various thorn bushes.

Figure 8: The Burning Bush before Moses

Theme Nine – Thorns as a DeMilleian Auteur Consistency Item: The repeated reference to thorn bushes within DeMille’s *The King of Kings*, *Samson and Delilah* and *The Ten Commandments* provided a subtle style of thematic unity and inter-filmic consistency. In this sense, DeMille-the-lay-biblical scholar is also mimicking the Bible with its repeated intra- and inter-Testament references to thorns that ranged from Genesis 3:18 to Hebrew 6:8. Such thorn-related thematic linkages, however full or fleeting, thus helped constitute DeMille’s personal signature, stamp and status as “the complete director-as-auteur in an age when neither the term nor the concept existed” (Elley, 1984, p.45).

Theme Ten – Thorns as Prominent Protrusions to be Respected: Botanical thorns are small but prominent protrusions that need to be carefully respected to avoid drawing blood. Although the scriptural Delilah does not have her gender and social class accentuated, she is in fact quite a prominent person simply because she has a recorded name in the Bible (unlike Samson’s mother and first wife). She is also considered worthy enough for the Philistine lords to approach her and suggest that she entice Samson for a fantastic amount of money, which they all *freely* offer her (Judg. 16:4–5).

Nor do these powerful Philistine lords instruct, command or demand Delilah comply as a patriotic duty (assuming Delilah is a Philistine, which the Bible does not state), or threaten her with violence as a physically, politically and militarily weak woman (as happened to Samson’s first wife—Judg. 14:15). Nor do they renege on their deal after Samson’s capture when Delilah’s tactical usefulness is at an end and she can do nothing to make demands if

they refused her payment. All of which indicates that the prominent Delilah-as-thorn is very well respected.

DeMille-the-passionate-researcher was apparently aware of these logical possibilities because he embarked upon a series of interlocking dialogue and plot features to defuse audience doubts about whether Delilah would ultimately be paid for her Samson success. His solution showcases the Philistine lords dutifully honouring their exorbitant debt to Delilah. When Samson was betrayed, weakened and captured, Ahtur said to an underling: “Courier! Take word to the lord of the five cities that Delilah has kept her bargain” and then he told Delilah: “The princes of Gaza will keep theirs... You shall have your payment”.

After the promised pieces of silver were gratefully poured out before Delilah’s feet (see Figure 6), the Saran of Gaza said to her: “Virtue is not often so well rewarded”, implying an unusual and lucrative arrangement. Delilah then politically replied: “My greatest reward was in serving my king”, cunningly implying nationalistic duty or personal loyalty to the Saran, but not romantic revenge as a scorned woman, her primary DeMillean motivation. Furthermore, Delilah received her payment in front of the Saran with whom she had previously negotiated Samson’s secret-capture price. The Saran was still romantically infatuated with her, and as an honourable (and powerful) Philistine leader, the paying lords would not want to offend him by going back on their word, especially in his royal presence.

Figure 6: Delilah’s Exorbitant Silver Payment

Nevertheless, DeMille had earlier prepared for the possibility that Delilah *could* have been cheated via a dialogic safeguard made during Samson’s wedding feast. One of the Philistine guests was agitated over Samson’s unsolvable riddle and indignantly said: “I’ll pay

no forfeit to that Danite clown”. However, Delilah emphatically retorted: “Oh yes you will, you made a wager”, thus implying an honour code that prefigured her honoured deal-to-come with the Saran and Philistine lords.

Consequently, many contemporary feminists consider the biblical Delilah to be prominent, respected and “a positive role model of female independence, imagination and self-sufficiency” (Smith, 1999, p.109), a loyal Philistine “true to her own culture... Delilah cannot be faulted for serving her people” (Klein, 1993, p.65). She could “be understood as a Philistine hero, much like Judith” (Jost, 1999, p.124); indeed, “Delilah would be a hero in the mind of her own people” (Bach, 1997, p.190) and “an example of a woman who is patriotic and shows initiative” (Smith, 1999, p.109). “A close reading of the text...highlights the inappropriateness of any interpretation that accuses Delilah of either seduction or deceit. Hers may have been courageous acts of national loyalty” (Laffey, 1988, p.105), albeit well-paid national loyalty (Judg. 16:5).

Alternatively, Scripture scholar Athalya Brenner does suggest a significant greed motive for the biblical Delilah: “there is a hint that financial gain and personal safety play their part in the choice the wives made!” (1985, p.113), referring to Samson’s first wife, and Delilah whom she considers was Samson’s second wife. During script conferences, DeMille certainly envisioned his Delilah having a greed component to her treachery when he said that “her beauty, her love and her greed [were] on display” (Birchard, 2004, p.336). Greed is significantly understated throughout the entire film, except in one key scene where it was greatly *intensified*, twice, as a fiscal sign of respect, and which was dialogically prepared for.

When the payment figure of “eleven hundred pieces of silver” was first raised (equivalent to the value of a Philistine caravan that Samson recently raided), a Philistine lord complained, “a Pharaoh’s ransom for a shepherd”, thus indicating its extremely high value for the non-scholarly audience. Secondly, despite the Bible’s reference to five Philistine lords (Judg. 3:3; 1 Sam 6:16), and DeMille’s five lords (of Ashdod, Gath, Ekron, Ashkelon, Sharif), and thus a biblical payment possibility of five thousand five hundred (1,100x5) pieces of silver, Delilah asked for payment from *each* of those persons seated before the Saran of Gaza, which were *ten* in number (i.e., the princes of Gaza, which comprised of Lords, priests etc.), thus a payment of eleven thousand (1,100x10) pieces of silver. However, such numerical subtlety is presumably missed by the majority of the paying public.

Nevertheless, the excessive asking price from DeMille’s Delilah was cunningly prepared for when one of the Philistine lords peremptorily offered her “some little bauble in the street of jewellers” for her secret-capture services. Delilah immediately replied with a

sarcastic expression and suppressed chortle, “You’re very generous!”, so that DeMille could dramatically emphasize the escalating monetary leap from a “little bauble” to “a Pharaoh’s ransom” (1,100) before it leaps again to a numerically unstated ten times that amount (11,000) moments later. Negotiating this exorbitant payment figure alone would have generated enormous respect for Delilah-the-thorn, who was now paining Philistines via their purses. Delilah had masterfully demonstrated her manipulative power over the Philistine elite just as she demonstrated her manipulative power over the elite Danite strongman, Samson.

If greed did not motivate Delilah, then praising the national loyalty/ native patriotism interpretation is just as problematic for some scholars:

A feminist-liberation-theological perspective takes into account not only gender but also relationships of domination [so] this reversal is at least somewhat problematic, for Delilah is one of the Philistines, the powerful nation. Taking her part requires that, at the same time, we do not lose sight of her complicity in the oppression of a smaller nation [Israel] (Jost, 1999, p.124).

The patriotic loyalty explanation is also less convincing, scripturally speaking, because the Philistine lords do not frame their Samson-related request in patriotic, nationalistic terms. Rather, their request was firmly premised upon an extravagant sum of money when their previous force-of-arms approach had spectacularly failed. DeMille dramatically conveyed this idea by having Delilah desperately remind the Philistines, “You’ve tried all other ways!” When the Philistine lords eventually accepted her proposal, one of them said faintly while leaving the audience chamber, “Think she can do it?” His companion replied, equally faintly, “We’ve tried everything else”.

Delilah-as-prominent-thorn was so fiscally painful to the Philistine lords that they literally jumped out of their seats (as if forcefully pricked) and charged towards the seated Saran with their vigorous objections. However, according to Judges 16:5, it is the Philistine lords who (unprompted, willingly and calmly) offered Delilah a fabulous amount of money for Samson’s secret, not the reverse as DeMille creatively depicted. Indeed, James L. Crenshaw suggested that “The astronomical bribe left Delilah speechless, at least for the moment. The story withholds her response to the Philistines; her subsequent actions leave no doubt about the positive manner in which she received the offer. For so much money, she regained the use of her tongue rapidly” (1978, p.93).

Delilah's motivations for accepting the mission and the reason for the exorbitant money offered her are not scripturally stated. DeMille had implied that Delilah's true motivations for her Samson-hunting actions were *not* primarily money-based, as traditionally accused. Money appeared to be only tangentially relevant to her, especially considering that Delilah dramatically rejected the Saran for a blind, captured Samson near the film's end. For feminist Elizabeth Wurtzel, Delilah's acceptance of the task was rooted in her vassal relationship with men:

Delilah, despite her sexual sorcery, would always be essentially powerless in a man's world, was still required to respond to the higher-ups among the Philistines, she was still compelled to hand over her man at will—anyone who doubts that she was *forced* to forfeit Samson will recall that the Philistine soldiers and officials waited outside her door as she questioned her husband about the well-spring of his strength, which would seem to suggest to me that this woman was hounded by law enforcement officials; her tent was no less under siege than David Koresh's compound in Waco as it was invaded by ATF troops. So Delilah is first at the mercy of the instability of her lover, who between her and his private jihad is serving at least two masters; and then she's at the mercy of the demands of her own state, with orders coming from the highest echelons... (1998, p.74).

For DeMille, Delilah's state service was wrapped around an obsessive core of deep personal revenge that the Philistine lords easily identified with. This helps explain why they agree to her exorbitant asking price (Judg. 16:5), with the concluding DeMilleian-inspired Philistine endorsement: "And if you succeed, no price will be too great!" However, the idea of a different kind of revenge was entertained by Elizabeth Wurtzel as the basis of Delilah's motivation, patriarchal and not romantic:

By turning Samson into a helpless blind man, Delilah is forcing him to see the world as she sees it, to feel humbled before God and man alike. She wants Samson to know her helplessness, and she wants him to feel that her devotion to him has cost her...Delilah wanted the pain of her worldview to count, to hold currency with Samson (1998, p.75).

9. Conclusion

As the above catalogue of interlocking thorn bush themes and related religious resonances clearly demonstrates, DeMille was a far defter biblical filmmaker than traditionally acknowledged, appreciated or honoured, and one who truly warrants his reputation as a “master storyteller and craftsman” (Bernheimer, 1998, p.49). As Roy Pickard put it: “No-one before or after his death could quite capture that special DeMille touch... [he] took his special kind of talent with him to the grave” (1978, p.80). According to Thomas L. Erskine, “Only a larger-than-life director could handle the larger-than-life themes, and the religious/ philosophical content of the historical spectacle” (2008, p.962). His choice of what appeared to be an insignificant and transitory “thorn bush” verbal tag was actually another subtle act of cine-biblical brilliance strategically embedded to create a filmic text thick with meaning and religious resonances. With a more sustained effort, even greater illustrative exemplars of his cinematic virtuosity could be gleaned.

As Hollywood’s foremost lay biblical scholar, DeMille deployed numerous trigger words and phrases throughout his biblical *oeuvre* that were pregnant with scriptural associations. Theological resonances often foreshadowed plot developments that the uninformed would easily miss – for example, the use of the word “blind” by Hazelepont to describe Samson well before his actual physical blinding, or verbal references to “light” immediately followed by a lighted Menorah candlestick in Miriam’s home, or the Philistine dwarf’s rejection of prayer prior to Samson’s prayer-based escape from captivity. Further research into DeMille studies, biblical epics, and the entire religion-and-film field is warranted, recommended and already long overdue.

Notes

1. Many scholars have spelled Cecil’s surname as “De Mille” or “de Mille” or “deMille” however, his professional name is “DeMille” (DeMille and Hayne, 1960, p.6), which will be employed herein (unless quoting variants) alongside “Cecil” and “C.B.” as appropriate.
2. The Authorized King James Version of the Bible (KJV) will be used throughout (unless quoting other versions) because it is a widely used English translation today (Taylor, 1992, pp.ix, 71) and it was DeMille’s personal favourite (Higashi, 1994, p.180).

3. Furthermore, “Hebrew and Greek terms for armed plants cannot be taken in a botanical taxonomic sense; in other words, the terms are general and not restricted to a certain genus or family of plants” (Musselman, 2012, p.136).

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