Some of the most difficult elements of the bible for application today are the many texts more or less sanctioning violence (Lohfink 1983; Lüdemann 1997; Collins 2003). Why do we read these bible texts, which were written in days and for people long gone by and expect or hope that they are relevant for us today? They are handed to us by tradition, but when we look at the way biblical texts have functioned in the history of the church we may find ourselves extremely discouraged. The bible was often misused to legitimise doubtful actions. Is it therefore possible to learn from faults in the past? What position do I have to take as an exegete? Can I function as an intermediate, passing through what originally inspired the holy writers? How can I avoid mixing it up with my own judgements? Is there a way not only to do justice to the text, but also to make it possible that the text can criticise me and help me to find my way as a believer in the world I am living in? What does it mean that I am part of Western culture and as an exegete educated in the tradition of the historical-critical approach to the text? I am well aware of the fact that my present position does make me suspect in the eyes of many who are disappointed by the meagre contribution of Western exeges in their attempts to make the biblical texts relevant today, especially in the less privileged parts of our world.

I should add that commenting on texts about violence is for me a serious problem. Indeed, I am happy not to have experienced extreme violence myself. As a pastor, I am familiar with stories of older people about the Second World War and I am impressed by learning how much impact the things they did or what was done to them can still
have on their lives. War came closer to the Netherlands when in the
1990s the Balkan peoples began their violent ethnic conflicts. War
came more or less to our country when we received our share of
(the fear of) terrorist attacks. However, I still feel like an outsider
when it comes to violence, only guessing what difference personal
experience of such things make when you deal with biblical stories
full of violence. This realisation makes it all the more important for
me to learn from the history of interpretation: how were these texts
read in different situations? Did these texts help their readers to get
a better view about themselves and upon the God who is or can
be related to these matters? Or were these texts used merely as an
illustration of a standpoint already taken? Which criteria were used
for choosing these texts to be read in a specific situation and for
interpreting them?

In this essay, I would like to begin with a personal attempt to
relate the historical-critical approach of the biblical text to a biblical
theology that takes seriously the issues of today. I will do so by first
looking at some of the most violent texts of the Old Testament: the
stories about Samson. What do we have to think of this judge of
Israel? Can he still be regarded as an example for those who want
to live and act out of faith, as he is presented in the letter to the
Hebrews 11:21–33? Does Samson foreshadow Jesus, as is maintained
not only in early Christian interpretation but also in modern ‘serious’
readings of the story in Judges 13–16 seeing in Samson a “forerunner
of the greatest Saviour of all” (Webb 1995:120). In my opinion this
has become very difficult, especially as I cannot put out of my head
the obvious parallels between Samson’s violent death described in
Judges 16 and that of the terrorist suicide attacks on the World Trade
Centre, New York, September 11, 2001: the ‘hero(es)’ giving their
lives attacking the enemy in the heart of their territory, destroying
the symbol of their power and killing nearly 3000 people.

In order to focus on the problem and on the way it has been dealt
with in the tradition of which I am part, I will first describe some
aspects of the history of interpretation of this section of the book
of Judges (Houtman and Spronk 2004; Gunn 2005:170–230). I will
then try to find my own way in the continuously changing field of
redaction critical theories about the book of Judges as part of the
Former Prophets, hoping to show that the latter can be of help in
letting the biblical texts speak today, while avoiding the less appeal-
ing examples we come across in the former.