The story of Samson (Judges 13–16) is ambivalent. On the one hand it is a dramatic story of the victory of one of God’s servants over God’s and Israel’s enemies; it is often loved by children. On the other hand it is also a very violent history; Samson seems to enjoy the indiscriminate killing of the Philistines.

It is especially Samson’s self-chosen death (Judg. 16:30) that is a poignant illustration of the aforementioned ambivalence. It appears heroic: Samson is willing to sacrifice his life in order to destroy the enemies of Israel. Although captured and blinded by the Philistines and a showcase of the defeat of Israel and of their God Yahweh, by a miraculous return of his powers he is able kill many Philistine by tearing down the temple of their God Dagon. This, however, also raises many questions. Samson’s suicide strongly reminds us of recent suicide operations by Islamic militants in New York (9/11) and Palestine. Both Samson and the Islamists are willing to die in order to kill as many ‘enemies’ as possible. The triumphant comment by the book of Judges—that the dead whom Samson killed at his death were more than those whom he had killed during his life—seems to indicate that despite his mistakes and failures, Samson was still a successful Judge. Moreover, it suggests that all of this was approved by God if not actually ordered by him.

The question that needs to be answered is how to value the death of Samson? Would interpreting his suicide martyrdom as heroic not lead to a mindset that regards people of other religions as enemies of God who need to be stopped at whatever cost? What exactly is the relation between the God of Israel and one of the first suicide operations in history? Is the God who instructs his people through the words of Jesus to love their

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1 David Canter (ed.), The Faces of Terrorism. Multidisciplinary Perspectives, (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), mentions Samson as one of the first suicide terrorists, 8, 20.
2 Jdg. 16:30b (ESV).
enemies and to pray for those who persecute them\(^3\) nonetheless behind Samson’s suicide mission? Is this God the same as the God who according to Paul wants people to bless those who persecute them, and who urges them not to repay evil with evil, nor to avenge themselves, but to feed their hungry enemy, give them something to drink and to overcome evil with good?\(^4\)

In order to deal with this question of how to appreciate Samson’s martyrdom, we will first briefly analyze his suicide and its similarities to modern suicide operations, especially in the name of Islam. Secondly, we will see how the book of Judges appraises the life and actions of Samson, in order to finally come to a critical Christian theological evaluation of Samson’s death. In this process our primary focus will not be the historical-critical issues of the text, but we will mainly try to understand the theological message of the text in the wider context of the book of Judges.\(^5\)

1.1. The Death of Samson and Modern Suicide Terrorism; Definition

When we want to compare the death of Samson with modern suicide operations, we should first of all realize that Islamists would never refer to them as suicide; suicide in Islam is forbidden.\(^6\) Muslims extremists consistently speak of martyrdom operations. The one killed during the operation has not committed suicide, but is regarded as a martyr. There is, however, a difference between the traditional meaning of martyrdom and relatively recent forms of attacks in the name of Islam. Traditionally from a Christian perspective a martyr is someone who has died for his faith, not willing to renounce his or her commitment to Jesus Christ;\(^7\) more generally the idea of martyrdom is also applied to dying for a noble cause.\(^8\) Being killed here is not the primary intention of the action, but the side effect of a higher goal. In suicide terrorism today, however, the death

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\(^3\) Matt. 5:44 (ESV).

\(^4\) Rom. 12:14, 17, 19, 20, 21 (NIV).

\(^5\) Cf. for some of these issues, Jan Pieter Bommel, *Simson in tweevoud: Een onderzoek naar de ontstaansgeschiedenis van Richteren 13–16* (Samson in duplicate. A research into the genesis of Judges 13–16), (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2004).

