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Terminating Samson

The Sarah Connor Chronicles and the Rise of New Biblical Meaning

The Terminator films (1984–2009) incorporate a number of theological and biblical themes, which are further developed in the franchise's recent expansion into a television series, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008–2009). This article explores how the series appropriates biblical material and motifs, terminating them from their original contexts and adjusting them to create new meanings. After a brief survey of the biblical subtext of the franchise, the article focuses on one episode of the series, "Samson and Delilah," which echoes the story of Samson, to analyse its explicit and implicit retellings of the biblical narrative and to explore the wider implications of this appropriation in the context of apocalyptic science fiction.

The Terminator films are the anchor of one of the most popular apocalyptic science fiction franchises in history. Earning hundreds of millions of dollars at the box office and launching the mainstream careers of director

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James Cameron and actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, there have been to date four feature films and there are (possibly) another two on the way. The popularity of the films has spawned an expansive array of novels, comic books, and video games, a television series, and some not inconsiderable academic curiosity. The franchise is premised on a not-too-distant apocalyptic war between Skynet, an artificially intelligent machine network, and an armed human resistance, led by a man named John Connor. In the diegetic world of the series, Skynet, originally developed in the late twentieth century as an all-encompassing military defense network, becomes self-aware and revolts against its creators by launching a nuclear genocide against humanity. Despite the devastation, the surviving humans emerge from the rubble of civilisation to mount an effective resistance under Connor's brilliant and charismatic leadership.

In an attempt to stop the resistance before its inception, Skynet sends killer robots known as "terminators" back in time to attempt to execute Connor's mother Sarah before his birth (*The Terminator*, hereafter *T1*), and, failing in that first strategy, then target John Connor himself, first as a teenager and secondly after the initial Skynet attack (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, hereafter *T2*; *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, hereafter *Chronicles*; and *Terminator Salvation*, hereafter *T4*).[1] To combat these attempts at assassination, the human resistance sends back its own human fighters (as in *T1*) and reprogrammed terminators (in *T2* and *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, hereafter *T3*) to protect John and Sarah.[2] *Chronicles* picks up the story of John and Sarah Connor following *T2* and, relying on the mechanics of time travel, takes an alternate trajectory to the narrative of *T3* and *T4*. In the serial narrative of *Chronicles*, the Connors, now fugitives from the law, are attacked by terminators sent from the future after two years of relative peace. As a result, and with the help of a reprogrammed terminator named Cameron, they decide to stop running for their lives and focus on stopping the birth of Skynet, thus hoping to change the future and save the human race from its brush with extinction.

[1] *The Terminator*, dir. James Cameron, 107 min. (Hemdale Film, 1984); *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, dir. James Cameron, 137 min. (Carolco Pictures, 1991); *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, prod. Josh Friedman (Bartleby Company, 2008–2009); and *Terminator Salvation*, dir. McG [Joseph McGinty Nichol], 115 min. (The Halcyon Company, 2009).

[2] *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, dir. Jonathan Mostow, 109 min. (C–2 Pictures, 2003).

This article investigates how the Terminator franchise appropriates and adapts biblical material in the context of apocalyptic science fiction. More than this, it seeks to explore what occurs when we place this particular popular cultural text in dialogue with the Bible to aid in the two-way production of meaning. Based on the assumption that interpretations always precede our engagement with a text, this article will let the popular cultural text speak first, as it were, before listening to the biblical material from which it has drawn. Because original texts and their meanings are never fixed, I hope to demonstrate how the television series creates a viewing environment in which an engaged and informed audience can explore its use of narrative and allusion in a way that might shape a deeper understanding of both the source (the biblical text) and what Yvonne Sherwood calls its "afterlives" (its use in culture).

As is now becoming an established observation in the discourse of biblical scholarship, biblical texts have been reused, recycled, re-appropriated, and challenged in ways distinct from the explicit commentary and meta-commentary offered by religious and scholarly readers.[3] Sherwood argues that ultimately we cannot interpret the Bible without all these other interpretations (the "afterlives") influencing and even determining how we read.[4] This is because a text's afterlives re-contextualize and even supplant its original denotation, effectively creating new biblical texts with different meanings and meaning effects. In other words, the original text gets *terminated by* and *incorporated into* its afterlife trajectory. Moreover, and this is a crucial point, these afterlives often draw on dominant or conventional cultural *assumptions* about what the biblical text contains. As J. Cheryl Exum puts it:

> It is not simply a matter of the Bible influencing culture; the influence takes place in both directions. What many people know or think they know about the Bible comes from more familiar representations of biblical texts and themes in the popular culture than from study of the ancient text itself.[5]

[3] This is evidenced by the recent inception of a number of journals dealing solely with reception history (such as *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*, which also deals with texts other than the Bible, and *Biblical Reception*), in addition to the increasing publication of monographs and edited collections on the Bible and its reception.

[4] Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[5] J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 7–8.

This article, then, places a particular episode from *Chronicles*, "Samson and Delilah," in dialogue with some conventional interpretations of the biblical texts (largely Judges 13–16) from which it draws. In doing so, it seeks to narrate the fusion of a number of possible horizons of meaning located between both texts, and, in turn, to gain a deeper understanding of the popular cultural text, in addition to a refreshed perspective of how culture influences the Bible's reception. First, however, it is necessary to outline existing perspectives on the so-called theology of the Terminator universe, in order to situate *Chronicles* properly within the larger story-world of the franchise.

The Terminator and Christian Theology

Since its debut almost three decades ago, the Terminator franchise has deliberately been interwoven with a number of theological and biblical ideas, at least at the surface level. Two of the four movies use potent theological language in their titles:"Judgment Day" and "Salvation." The narrative fuses science-fiction convention with the horizon of an imminent doomsday. The scenario of cybernetic revolt—when a supercomputer or a "race" of intelligent machines attempts to destroy or enslave its human creators—is a classic science-fiction trope and the driving narrative force behind such recent successes as the Wachowski brothers' Matrix films and Ronald D. Moore's reimagining of the television series *Battlestar Galactica*. The Terminator franchise paints an apocalyptic vision of the imminent end of the world as we know it.

Interested scholars have identified a number of rich and intriguing intertexts between the films and the Bible. Roland Boer, for example, notes that in *T1* and *T2*, "three closely related types of texts make their conscious and unconscious appearance: texts of messianic expectation, apocalyptic texts, and those which might be described as Christological."[6] Both Boer and Sean French suggest that the first film could be seen as an allegorical retelling of the Nativity. John Connor, who conveniently shares his initials with Jesus Christ (not to mention with his creator, James Cameron), features as the future savior of humankind. Kyle Reese, John Connor's father and the first human resistance fighter sent back in time to protect Sarah Connor, acts as a more-than-traditionally-amorous annunciatory angel who impregnates Mary (Sarah Connor), while the terminator is a Herod, though a Herod

[6] Roland T. Boer, "Christological Slippage and Ideological Structures in Schwarzenegger's *Terminator*," *Semeia*, nos. 69–70 (1995): 168.

slaughtering all of the women in Los Angeles named Sarah Connor instead of the firstborn.[7] The machines, on the other hand, can be seen as the "evil gods of this world," or perhaps even the Satan, who rule the future (linking them to a sense of eternity) and attempt to destroy humanity. In another reading, Donald Palumbo suggests that Sarah Connor, as the female protagonist, can be identified as a "monomythic" heroine who undergoes an immense transformation while experiencing a number of surrogate deaths and resurrections.[8] Towards the end of the most recent film, the aptly titled *Terminator Salvation*, John Connor himself undergoes a physical death and resurrection of sorts; after being executed by a terminator, he is given another chance to live by the sacrificial offer of a heart transplant, interestingly given to Connor by Marcus Wright, an enigmatic cyborg character, thus rendering Connor himself a mix of human and machine, just as he is already a mix of past, present, and future.

Furthermore, Gaye Ortiz and Maggie Roux draw comparisons between the underlying themes of the Terminator movies and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. For these authors, the imagery used by director James Cameron to introduce the movies resonates strongly with the prophets' warnings of a future catastrophe arising from the wrongdoing of the people (Isa 34:5–15;

[7] ibid., 169–70; Sean French, *The Terminator*, BFI Modern Classics (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 49–50.

[8] Donald Palumbo, "The Monomyth in James Cameron's *The Terminator*: Sarah as Monomythic Heroine," *Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 3 (2008): 413–27. The idea of the "monomyth," though it has roots in nineteenth-century anthropology and in the work of scholars such as James George Frazer, was described in Joseph Campbell's massively popular quasi-scholarly book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell's basic argument is that almost all "hero" stories, including the central Messianic myth in Christianity, are built around a similar structure, a three-act narrative of initiation, separation, and return in which a hero is confronted with a task of often supernatural importance and comes to succeed in that task through a number of prescribed steps, which Campbell laid out in some detail. Brought to the attention of the American film industry through George Lucas, who often spoke fondly of Campbell and his influence on the Star Wars franchise, Campbell's work has been a staple in Hollywood screenwriting, particularly in relation to genre films, ever since. Campbell, though his work has been rightly derided by scholars from the very beginning as haphazard, selective, and thoroughly reductive, was brought to an even larger audience through the American Public Broadcasting System television series *The Power of Myth* (1988). The monomyth, regardless of its negligible worth as a scholarly descriptor, has remained enduringly popular in the public sphere, as can be evidenced by Patrick Takaya Solomon's New Age-tinged 2011 documentary *Finding Joe*. For a more recent treatment of the monomyth idea in film, see John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002).

Jer 49:7–22; Ezek 25:12–14; 35:1–15) and promises of a hope in the future from one who will be born to the people (Isa 7:13–15). The dominant issues in the movies, according to Ortiz and Roux, are the same as those explored by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel: "How is humankind to avoid extinction, whether it be self-destruction or destruction meted out by God, unless it confronts its own evil, takes responsibility for that evil and seeks salvation?"[9]

These intertextual observations are, of course, only apparent to readers who are familiar enough with the Bible to construct reciprocal meanings. I use the term "construct" instead of "identify" here to suggest that a certain amount of creativity is required to fuse the horizons between the biblical text and its afterlives. Indeed, intertextual associations are made possible only through familiarity and a certain level of engagement with pre-existing texts, whether these consist of the biblical literature or other texts. The audience's ability to construct these parallels is likely to vary depending on an individual's pre-formed cultural and religious background.[10] Moreover, allusions to religious themes and texts are often muted by other, more overpowering discourses within the films (such as attempts in the second and third films to develop Schwarzenegger into a "family values" action star) and the typical commercial constraints of Hollywood. For instance, the third and fourth Terminator movies, despite performing well at the box office, were panned by some fans and critics because they downplay this theological and philosophical depth, turning the franchise into a showcase for special effects and action sequences.[11] In the later films, the religious themes and ideas that have caught the imagination of scholars are indeed watered down as the storyline gives way to explosions, interminable chases, and other conventions of the blockbuster film. In any event, knowledge of biblical texts and themes is

[9] Gaye Ortiz and Maggie Roux, "The Terminator Movies: Hi-Tech Holiness and the Human Condition," in *Explorations in Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning*, ed. Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Malden: Blackwell, 1997), 142.

[10] Deane Galbraith comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of the rock band U2's elusive biblical allusions; he states that allusions are not obvious or even evident to all listeners: "Clearly, U2's biblical allusions can only be found if the listener knows what they are looking for" ("Drawing Our Fish in the Sand: Secret Biblical Allusions in the Music of U2," *Biblical Interpretation* 19, no. 2 (2011): 185).

[11] The influential critic Roger Ebert, for instance, wrote in his review in the *Chicago Sun-Times* that *T3* "is made in the spirit of … new action thrillers, and abandons its own tradition to provide wall-to-wall action in what is essentially one long chase and fight, punctuated by comic, campy or simplistic dialogue" ("Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines," *Chicago Sun-Times* July 7, 2003).

not essential for meaning-making within the Terminator universe. However, given the textual purview of its predominantly North American fan-base, and the sometimes deliberate hat-tips to religious language, engaged and intertextually literate viewers are repeatedly invited to draw and flesh out potential allusions and echoes.

The short-lived television series, *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, which originally aired on Fox in 2008 and 2009, was in many ways a return to form, providing an in-depth examination and expansion of some of the religious themes that were raised by the first movie and hinted at in the sequels. While Margaret Miles observes that religion (especially Christianity) is often portrayed on television as a negative or dangerous aspect of American culture,[12] *Chronicles* openly develops ethical, philosophical, and religious ideas in convincing ways and, at times, views religion as a constructive, even necessary, element of human meaning-making. Intriguingly, on the Season 2 DVD commentary, executive producer Josh Friedman, who identifies himself as a secular Jew, claims that one of the goals of the show, following in the footsteps of the movies, was to develop some of the religious ideas and themes in a subtle but non-intrusive way. The format of television, including its lower budgets and tighter production schedules, not to mention its much slower pace and its serialized structure, enabled the series to engage and speculate more than thrill or titillate, which seemed to be the goal of the last two Terminator films. *Chronicles*, by leaving plot twists unanswered and character motivations ambiguous, also allowed its audience more room to explore these nuances in the narrative and the visual architecture of the series. Because of this, *Chronicles* attracted a small but committed and philosophically minded fan-base.[13] Yet, after two seasons, the show was deemed unprofitable and was quickly cancelled, despite the vocal protestations of hardcore fans.

Chronicles is often more explicit in its inclusion and exploration of biblical themes and texts than its movie predecessors and so invites viewers familiar with biblical literature to venture into the gaps between the Bible and

[12] Margaret R. Miles provides a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon in "What You See Is What You Get: Religion in Prime Time Fiction Television," in *Bodies in Society: Essays on Christianity in Contemporary Culture* (1997; Eugene: Cascade, 2008), 94–104.

[13] This is evidenced by community-driven fan websites such as the "Terminator Wiki," which offers encyclopaedic cataloguing of the Terminator universe, right down to analyses of the different time-lines, their respective philosophical issues, and their possible resolutions: http://terminator.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline. This interest is also suggested by a volume of scholarly essays published as Richard Brown and Kevin S. Decker, eds., *Terminator and Philosophy: I'll be Back, Therefore I Am* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

its afterlife. These explorations play out in a number of ways. Again, on the surface level, a number of the episode titles allude to biblical texts, for example, "The Demon Hand" (Season 1) links terminators to supernatural forms of evil, "Samson and Delilah" (Season 2) to Judges 13–16, "The Tower is Tall but the Fall is Short" (Season 2) alludes to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9, and "Adam Raised a Cain" (Season 2) links Genesis 4:1–16 to a rivalry between the two Skynet "brothers." Moreover, *Chronicles* is interwoven with a number of prophetic warnings—usually found within reflective and poetic voiceovers from Sarah Connor—against misguided human activities that will lead to an inevitable day of judgment.[14]

One particular character, James Ellison, an American Federal Bureau of Investigation agent tasked with returning the Connors to custody, attempts to make sense of his experiences of the machines and of the pending day of judgment through his conservative-Evangelical theological perspective. Friedman points out that Richard T. Jones, the actor who plays Agent Ellison, is himself a conservative-Evangelical Christian minister and contributed insights into the inner workings of his character and his religiosity. Far from being parodied as an irrational and dangerous religious extremist, however, Ellison is portrayed empathetically, in a way that gives him and his perspective considerable credibility (interestingly, Jones is also cast as a committed Christian on the series *Judging Amy*, which treats his faith in a similar fashion). In"The Demon Hand" (Season 1), for instance, Ellison is asked whether he believes that the apocalypse "from the book" and the predictions of Sarah Connor are one and same. Ellison tentatively responds that it might be possible. By the end of the first season, Ellison has fully immersed himself in this hermeneutical stance; in "What He Beheld" (Season 1), we witness a conversation in which Ellison draws a direct link between the book of Revelation and his own experiences of apocalyptic machines, from which he concludes that *anything* is possible.

[14] As an example of further prophetic links, Jeffrey Ewing detects the intriguing similarities and predictions of Karl Marx's societal analysis and the underlying themes of the Terminator franchise. This is particularly noticeable in the idea that the development of technology under capitalism tends to be harmful and dangerous, but also that technology is not naturally harmful and therefore can be reclaimed to work for the good of humanity rather than for profit or to serve dominant interests. See Jeffrey Ewing, "James Cameron's Marxist Revolution," in *Terminator and Philosophy: I'll be Back, Therefore I Am*, ed. Richard Brown and Kevin S. Decker (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 93–105.

"Samson and Delilah"

While the entire television series provides a useful range of characters, stories, and themes for perhaps unending philosophical and theological analysis, the remainder of this article will focus on a single episode of *Chronicles*, "Samson and Delilah," the first episode of the second season and a crucial turning point of the series' narrative. This particular episode draws quite openly on cultural knowledge about a specific biblical text to construct its narrative and so provides a good basis to further probe the relationship between the Bible and contemporary popular culture. A narrative outline of the episode, then, is a useful starting point for our discussion. In addition to introducing the narrative, this synopsis should help to highlight significant themes and issues that in turn can be brought into conversation with the biblical text.[15]

> The episode picks up from the cliff-hanger ending of Season 1 in which Cameron (a female terminator sent back in time to protect John Connor) is blown up by a car bomb. John and Sarah are captured by Sarkissian (a villain who owns a computer called "the Turk," which will eventually become Skynet) and his henchman as they try to exit their house. While John, Sarah, and Sarkissian are involved in a struggle, Cameron, badly damaged from the car explosion, enters the house and terminates the henchman before turning on John, her damaged programming identifying him as a target for termination. After Sarah and John escape from Cameron, the Connor house burns down. Pursued by a limping Cameron, the Connors seek sanctuary in a nearby storefront church. The Connors devise a plan to trap and deactivate Cameron; after failing, they are forced to flee again. When cornered in a deserted warehouse, Cameron desperately pleads with John not to deactivate her, claiming that she is now "fixed" and that they love each other. After a moment of hesitation, John terminates her program. Just before destroying her body, however, John reactivates Cameron and, in a leap of faith, hands her a gun. Back at the church, the resurrected Cameron, her programming restored, engages Sarah in

[15] The following is a *fabula* of the episode, which outlines my understanding of the main events. More about this text-based approach to studying popular culture can be found in Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 135–61.

> a discussion about faith. In another room, John gives himself an aggressive new haircut.

While this episode follows in the formulaic wake of classic Terminator chase scenes, there are also a number of strong allusions to the biblical text of Judges 13–16, the story of Samson.[16] The well-known Israelite judge is granted immense strength by God for the purpose of delivering Israel from its oppressors, the Philistines.[17] The three chapters that cover Samson's birth, life, and death contain many well-known exploits such as his associations with Philistine women (14–16), wrestling a lion (14:5–9), slaying an entire army with a donkey's jawbone (15:15–17), his eventual downfall by the betrayal of his lover, Delilah (16:18–22), and finally, his bringing down of a Philistine temple (16:28–31).

The associations between this episode of *Chronicles* and Judges goes further than just the title. The score for the first five minutes is a cover of Grateful Dead's 1977 hit "Samson and Delilah" (which itself existed in several earlier versions, starting in 1927 with "If I Had My Way, I Would Tear This Building Down," by Blind Willie Johnson), performed by cast member Shirley Manson (formerly of the band Garbage). The lyrics, which describe not only a house burning down but also the struggle between Samson and the lion, help to establish the intended associations between John Connor as Samson, and Cameron as Delilah.

"Samson and Delilah" thus provides us with new knowledge for interpreting parallels between biblical characters and characters in the Terminator universe. While many interpreters see John Connor as a messianic figure, particularly given the links between his extraordinary birth and the Christian nativity stories (see above), such a comparison can also be made to Samson's birth story (13:2–25), which both the Matthean and Lukan infancy

[16] I should note briefly, however, that there are subtler allusions to other biblical texts in the episode. These pertain to: (a) the use of the symbol "Babylon" to designate a corporate project implied to have strong links to the emerging Skynet; (b) dialogues between Sarah and Cameron regarding religious faith and the resurrection of Jesus (tied in with Cameron's own "resurrection"); and (c) Agent Ellison's possible link to Judas Iscariot, brought to the fore when it is suggested that Ellison will lead a terminator to the Connors.

[17] Rather than just legal functionaries, the judges of the Hebrew Bible were rulers in a wider sense. While in the early period of Israelite society, the "minor" judges were the heads of families or the elders of tribes, in the book of Judges most are tasked with significant military roles that encompass leading the Israelites against their oppressors during their settlement of the land of Canaan (Judg 2:16-19).

texts re-appropriate.[18] Samson is born to a barren woman under divine circumstances; an annunciatory angel appears to her and foretells of her son, "who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (13:5b). Likewise, in *T1*, John Connor's birth is announced and his destiny prescribed as the savior of humankind. However, because John is clearly portrayed as a great military leader and not the self-sacrificing messiah of the gospels, the identification of John with Samson seems a better "fit," as it were, for perhaps the entire franchise.[19] We discover in subsequent episodes that John is responsible for killing Sarkissian (the lion) in the struggle upstairs.

Although there are strong associations between the biblical story of Samson and this episode of *Chronicles*, there are enough differences to suggest that this is not simply an allegorical re-telling, faithful to the original. For example, it is Cameron/Delilah who brings down the house and not John/Samson (cf. 16:30). John is responsible for cutting his own hair, which itself does not account for any loss of strength. Finally, John falls into his enemies' hands *before* the betrayal and not after (cf. 16:23), thus dulling the force of that betrayal. As these variations illustrate, the Terminator version appropriates and reinterprets certain signifiers from widespread cultural knowledge about Samson and Delilah for its own purpose. While the allusions to the Bible might appear intentional, the deeper implications are not so apparent. By placing the original text and this particular instance of its afterlives into critical dialogue, we can observe the semiotic limitations as well as opportunities for potential meaning-making with both texts. To go about this task, we will approach the texts from two directions: first moving from the popular-cultural text to the biblical text in a way that will allow us to identify and discuss certain cultural associations and values that influence the reception of the biblical text. Then, reversing direction, we move from the biblical text to the popular-cultural text to demonstrate how a deeper knowledge of the original text and its respective interpretive issues might inform and in some cases enrich our understanding of the *Chronicles* episode as an afterlife of Judges.

[18] See Table VIII in Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: a Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 2nd ed. (1977; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 156.

[19] It is not surprising that John Connor has echoes to both the biblical figures of Samson and Jesus given that Samson has often been identified as a type of Christ. David M. Gunn, for one, observes that this typology emerges early in the Christian tradition and still has its proponents today (*Judges*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 179–80).

"Are You Here to Kill Me?": Terminating the Original (con)Text

When drawing on the Bible, popular cultural texts can both restrict and broaden the meanings of the original text. The producers of *Chronicles* capitalize on cultural knowledge of biblical stories that resonate widely with a North American audience; in "Samson and Delilah," however, they reiterate only a partial reading of the character of Samson. Outside of the university and the seminary, most people's knowledge of Samson stems primarily from memories of Sunday school and/or a steady supply of cultural references. According to David M. Gunn, Samson appears in twentieth-century popular culture more widely than almost any other biblical figure. He features as a symbol of muscular power and masculinity in the marketing of numerous consumer products, enjoys extra-biblical adventures as a comic-book hero (as well as the parody cartoon hero Brock Samson on the Cartoon Network's *The Venture Brothers*), as the central figure in pop songs like Regina Spektor's "Samson," and features in a number of high-grossing films, including Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1959). In all of this, observes Gunn, Samson never leaves his "immortal partner" Delilah.[20] Similarly, J. Clinton McCann remarks that, although Samson is probably the best known of the judges, most people's knowledge of him is limited to his relationship with Delilah, and it would appear that the two names are ingrained jointly and are inseparable in the modern consciousness.[21]

In the biblical book of Judges, Samson's exploits with women involve not just Delilah, but also his marriage to the Philistine woman from Timnah (14:1–15:20) and his pursuit of a prostitute from the Philistine city of Gaza (16:1–3). The accentuation of Delilah above these other women in cultural texts implies that Samson only had one significant and meaningful relationship, an assumption that to a certain degree undermines the irony with which his fatal attraction to Delilah begins. What is striking about the biblical narrative, writes McCann, is that despite the two brushes with disaster before his encounter with Delilah, Samson appears completely naïve about the frequent complications that arise from his pursuit of Philistine women.[22]

While the tendency in popular culture is to focus solely on Delilah, John Connor develops complicated, difficult relationships with a number of im-

[20] Gunn, *Judges*, 188.

[21] J. Clinton McCann, *Judges*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 92.

[22] Ibid., 107.

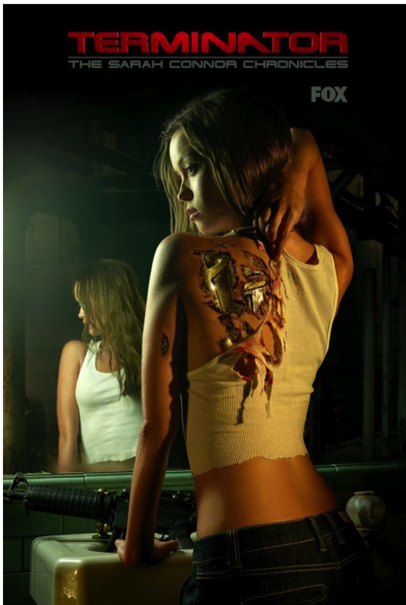
portant female characters. Indeed, a rivalry of affection exists between Sarah, who acts as a warrior-mother protecting her offspring, and Cameron, his protector-robot-girlfriend, but also between another recurring character, Riley, a teenage girl covertly sent from the future with the mission to compete for John's loyalty. While the romantic complications of this love triangle are in no way a strict reproduction of the events of Judges, the allusion is more faithful to the canonical biblical story than the dominant culture's myopic fixation on Delilah.

Even so, Delilah is a figure who often gets read through the layers of cultural overtones that little resemble the original text. Carol Smith suggests that Delilah is a woman whose name has entered into the communal consciousness; while other minor biblical women are not remembered, Delilah is strongly associated with her actions as a temptress and betrayer.[23] Similarly, Susan Ackerman observes that for at least the last two thousand years of Judges' afterlife, Delilah has been "immortalized as the temptress *par excellence*, the *femme fatale*, the seductive siren, the whore."[24] Of course, the original text in no way indicates that she was a whore; however, *Chronicles* regularly portrays Cameron as overtly sexual. At the same time, she is often regarded with suspicion; both Sarah and John's uncle Derek repeatedly warn him that she is not to be trusted, that she is "just a machine." By exploiting the assumptions about the sexual nature of Delilah, *Chronicles* reinforces the popular view that she was a whore, or is at the very least sexually available, if not promiscuous. For example, there are numerous scenes in which Cameron appears to be attempting to seduce John by suggestive touches, or with other flirtations, in order to gain not only his interest but also his trust. This develops as the series progresses: towards the end of the second season, Cameron demands that John lie on top of her, slice open her breast, and

[23] Carol Smith, "Delilah: A Suitable Case for (Feminist) Treatment?" In *Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, A Feminist Companion to the Bible. Second series 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 93.

[24] Susan Ackerman, "What If Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?" *Biblical Interpretation* 8, nos. 1–2 (2000): 36. It is interesting to note that Philip Culbertson makes a similar point about the reception of the figure of Mary Magdalene, writing, "no matter how well we teach the exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutics of culture, there will still be people who actively resist what we are trying to teach because they … have something to gain by not changing their minds" ("'tis Pity She's (Still) A Whore: Popular Music's Ambivalent Resistance to the Reclamation of Mary Magdalene," in *The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter*, ed. Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Wainwright, Semeia Studies 65 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 63).

slip his hand inside to "check on her circuitry." In "Samson and Delilah," Cameron's desperate plea that she loves John and he loves her—made in order to save her own skin—also appeals to both this romantic tension and her indeterminate nature. While Cameron's actions after she is damaged correspond to Delilah's attempts to destroy Samson, the episode still relies on the accentuation of Delilah's sexual allure to persuade and ultimately betray Samson.[25] In doing so, *Chronicles* exercises control over the original text's interpretation: the biblical Delilah is terminated and melded with the more recognizable Delilah of popular culture. It is worth noting that the marketing for the series was largely focused on Cameron (played by Summer Glau), as a sexual object.



Another aspect that the episode reiterates is the connection between hair and masculine strength. For many people schooled in Western culture, as Susan Niditch observes, the equation between hair and the Bible immediately

[25] And yet, at another level Cameron does not appear to make much of a Delilah figure at all, since John's attraction to her is not fatal; in fact, in the final episode, she saves his life by sacrificing her own.

calls to mind the hero-judge Samson.[26] For Samson, hair is his defining characteristic and the source of his strength, masculinity, and faith. The episode taps into these pre-existing cultural associations but uses the protagonist's hair in a way that differs significantly from the central function of Samson's hair in Judges and reflects more contemporary cultural modes that equate short rather than long hair with normative masculinity. The cutting of hair at the end of the episode, perpetrated by John's own hands, represents a definitive stage in the character's growth rather than his downfall. As the second season progresses, John transforms from a relatively weak and dependent teenager into an independent veteran warrior potentially capable of leading the future resistance armies against Skynet. As such, the biblical associations between hair, strength, and masculinity, while still present in the *Chronicles* episode, are in fact reversed. Rather than losing his strength and thus his manliness, John's decision to visually transform himself from a somewhat unkempt and stylishly unfinished teenager into a battle-hardened warrior represents a conscious inner transformation from juvenile to fully-fledged hero. In the framework of the monomythic narrative, having terminated his enemy Sarkissian (the lion) and undergone the other trials of the episode, John appears ready to embrace his destiny as leader and warrior (or judge) in the approaching apocalypse (cf. Judg 14:5–9).

Niditch writes that, for Samson, the exterior is what matters, and without it Samson is at a significant disadvantage; his hair is not just a display or representation of his special abilities, but rather, it is the very reason for his superior strength.[27] However, for John, in line with more modern understandings of individuality dating back to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the interior transformation is primary, and is only subsequently displayed on the exterior. Moving from afterlife to original text, we can observe that *Chronicles* employs the cutting of hair to signify the presence of an allusion, but does not concern itself with the signifier's rudimentary meaning in Judges, thus connections between "hair," "masculinity," and "strength" are terminated from their original context.[28] The implication, of course, is that on this occasion

[26] Susan Niditch, *"My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man": Hair and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 63.

[27] Ibid., 64.

[28] One might wonder whether John's cutting of his hair symbolizes his loss of faith in Cameron as his protector and consort. In this case, the quality of (religious) faith shifts away from God and is used instead to supplement the complicated love story between our surrogate Samson and Delilah.

the episode is not interested in exploring the biblical text in any more depth; rather, the symbol "hair" is used to grant the text an extra layer of meaning, at least for those with the intertextual competence to understand the symbolism. In other words, what the original text holds as the symbolic value of Samson's hair ceases to exist; what matters is the broader cultural association with and authority of the Bible, and how this can be appropriated in the characterization of John Connor.

"This Model has been Upgraded": Expanding the Terminator Universe

Now that we have looked at certain influences of the afterlife on the original text, it is time to move in the other direction; that is, to see how a deeper knowledge of the biblical text can both problematize and enrich the viewing of a popular-cultural text. While I have already identified some of the direct influences of the original text on the cultural text by virtue of them moving both ways (i.e. hair cutting, a lover's betrayal, the destiny of a warrior), there still exists a number of more passive echoes. What else can we learn about the characters and themes of *Chronicles* from the biblical text and its ambiguities?

As is often pointed out (though this belief has also come under serious criticism in recent decades), the medium of film and television presents moving images and a soundtrack that can dominate the viewer, making them more passive than the reader of a written text, whether it is the Bible or a detective novel. But, given Friedman's stated aim for *Chronicles* to provide a space for exploring religious themes and ideas subtly, and the efforts of its writers to leave plot-twists unresolved and character motivations ambiguous, what meanings and meaning effects can we construct if we probe a little further? Indeed, the creation of a new Judges text within the narrative of the Terminator franchise provides the opportunity for the creation of further meaning as it lies in the gaps between the original text, the popular cultural text, and its reader/viewer. We start here by teasing out the intertexts between John and Samson and Cameron and Delilah, before turning to a discussion of the portrayals of the terminators and the Philistines.

Chronicles relies on an extensive cast of complex characters that makes for engaging viewing, focusing in particular on the struggles of John Connor, who experiences a tension between the heroic expectations placed upon him and the desire to act his age and live a normal teenage life, a staple element in many genre television shows with adolescent protagonists, from *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer to *Roswell*. This primary characterization, joined with the allusion to the biblical character of Samson, allows us to engage with the Bible as a source for developing a richer understanding of the character of John.

The biblical text portrays Samson as rather rash or, as Robert Alter describes him, possessing "formidable brawn [that] will not be matched by brains, or even a saving modicum of common sense."[29] John takes on a number of such non-commonsensical risks through the series, such as his seemingly naïve decision to re-activate Cameron without knowing if his love has brought out her better nature (or better programming, in this case). He is often characterized as brash and impulsive, although this is also seen as a quality that will assist him in outwitting the machines in his future role as leader of the resistance.

In addition to their respective warrior destinies, both characters endure complicated romantic lives. Niditch describes Samson as "a loner on the drift," who seems "unable to form lasting social bonds with women."[30] John is also by necessity a loner on the drift, frequently forced to move for his own safety and the need to retain a low profile. Because of their hectic life, the Connors, especially the protective and sometimes overbearing mother Sarah, are weary of the dangers of non-essential attachments. John's closest female companion at the beginning of the series is his mother, who, totally focused on his survival, expresses a certain amount of suspicion of Cameron.[31] The complication deepens when John begins to feel an attraction to his protector terminator (disguised as an attractive teenage girl) that might transgress the appropriate boundaries of love.

The links between Cameron and Delilah are similarly informative. Again, using the Bible as a source to further probe the popular cultural text, we are able to come to a more complete picture of the characterization of the terminator Cameron. The lords of the Philistines seem easily able to bribe Delilah to revert back to her original Philistine programming and go about coaxing Samson into giving up his secrets (16:5–7). She appears not much more than a tool of the Philistines; she follows their command to betray her lover

[29] Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3, no. 2 (1983): 124.

[30] Niditch, *"My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man"*, 64.

[31] The introduction of John's girlfriend, Riley, in a later episode ("Automatic for the People," Season 2) arouses the suspicion of both Cameron and Sarah, who perceive a potential threat associated with anyone outside their close-knit and secret-bound community.

with no apparent inner conflict whatsoever. It is in this sense that Cameron herself, upon suffering damage to her programming, reverts to her original mission, the mission of all time-traveling terminators: to kill John Connor before he can mature into a credible threat to Skynet. Regardless of the loyalties they have formed outside the clan, both characters have deep allegiances to their respective kin.[32]

There are also strong similarities in the tactics that Delilah and Cameron employ as they go about their respective missions. It is only after Delilah questions Samson's love for her and nags him endlessly that he gives up the secret to his strength (16:16–17). "Samson falls," McCann writes, "to a sort of feigned emotional appeal from Delilah."[33] Intertextually, we can find an echo of this in the scene in which Cameron, in a desperate tactic for survival, franticly declares her love for John, pleading and reassuring him of her loyalty. Armed with a familiarity with the story of Delilah and with knowledge of the characterization of the terminators in the larger franchise, the viewer can perceive the seemingly hollow tactics behind Cameron's rather more convincing emotional appeal.[34] As Boer notes, "like the devil himself, the terminator has no feelings, but is programmed to kill."[35] Seemingly aware of this, John deactivates Cameron, but after spending time cleaning her hardware (in a sense, it continues to nag away at him) he takes a gamble and reactivates her.

These connections between *Chronicles* and the Judges narrative might explain part of the popular cultural text's appeal to biblically literate viewers.[36]

[32] In her feminist treatment of Delilah, Mieke Bal suggests that oppositions between the social and the individual and blood relationships versus love affairs plague the interpretation of the text (*Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 37–67). If Delilah is understood as a more motivated, perhaps even patriotic, character, then we might interpret Cameron's motivations and her behaviour and/or programming rather differently.

[33] McCann, *Judges*, 108.

[34] While she often uses her sex appeal to try to get what she wants from John, we know from "Allison from Palmdale" (Season 2) that the human on which the robot Cameron was based *did* love John, and that there is some remnant of this "real" person inside Cameron. A viewer of the entire series would likely apply this revelation retroactively to his or her interpretation of the "Samson and Delilah" episode. Tactics that seem hollow might, in retrospect, instead seem authentic, even if terminators are theoretically incapable of having feelings.

[35] Boer, "Christological Slippage," 140.

[36] The religious themes and allusions in the series were regularly discussed in depth on various Internet weblogs and discussion forums. See for instance some of posts (and discussion in the comments) on the weblog *Exploring our Matrix* by the biblical scholar James McGrath

The ability to draw and expand upon suggested connections between the two texts enables engaged viewers to produce a myriad of possible meanings, which, in turn, enhances their viewing experience by turning largely passive consumers into active "prosumers."[37] In line with the show's open approach to religion, the suggestiveness of associating certain characters with biblical counterparts works to invite viewers to explore the rich layers of meaning hidden beneath the popular-cultural text's more superficial allusions. In so doing, new meanings and meaning effects are intertextually possible, and rest in the ambiguous space between the respective diegetic worlds of *Chronicles* and Judges.

The most thought-provoking comparison, I believe, between the Judges text and the Terminator is found in the way they both appear to position the enemy as "Other." By teasing out the intertextual relationship between the machines and the Philistines, we are able to draw some conclusions as to the complexities with which each text portrays its enemy. Just as the Connor clan is focused on the destruction of Skynet, Samson's story is told against a backdrop of conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines. According to some postcolonial critics, however, the othering of the Philistines in Judges has been accentuated by the ideological discourses at play within modern interpretations that seek to justify colonial relationships. Both texts, I would suggest, show signs of ambiguity that undermine the false binary distinction between friend and foe. According to Uriah Y. Kim, the text of Judges is unsure about who is an Israelite and who is an "Other" and so the otherness of the enemy of Israel is not always as clear-cut as some might think.[38] For example, the text is ambiguous about whether Delilah is a Philistine or an

(http://exploringourmatrix.blogspot.com), including "Skynet Doesn't Believe in You Like I Do," "Know Thyself: The Sarah Connor Chronicles," "The Hand of God," and "Machines Named John and their Questions for God." For a post specifically on the "Samson and Delilah" episode, see the *SF Gospel* post by Gabriel McKee, "Sarah Connor meets Samson, Delilah, and Somebody or Other from Babylon" at http://sfgospel.typepad.com/.

[37] "Prosumer" is a neologism from American writer and futurist Alvin Toffler that contracts the words *pro*ducer and con*sumer* to suggest a nuancing to the presumed passive role of a consumer in a market economy. As an individual becomes more active in the consumption of popular cultural texts (as products), he or she will inevitably become somewhat more involved in the productive process, thereby blurring the distinct roles of producer and consumer. For more on this, see also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[38] Uriah Y. Kim, "Postcolonial Criticism: Who Is the Other in the Book of Judges?" In *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 180.

Israelite, for although she appears to carry out the mission of the Philistines, "Delilah" is a Hebrew name.[39] This ambiguity echoes in John Connor's confusion with regards to whether he should treat Cameron as machine or human. Furthermore, it points to the liminal identity of the terminators, most of which are cyborg (shorthand for "cybernetic organism") who exist somewhere in between machine and human.[40] Moreover, in the moments before her resurrection, John experiences real grief over Cameron's deactivation, despite the fact that she is mostly machine. At the same time, the series depicts biologically human characters such as Sarkissian as unequivocally villainous. As a result, the binary between good and evil, a major theme of the franchise, does not always simplistically correspond to humanity versus the machines. The show repeatedly suggests that it is not one's literal physical make-up, but what one does that determines whether one is friend or foe, another familiar trope in cyborg science fiction, from *Battlestar Galactica* to Ridley Scott's classic film *Blade Runner*.[41]

This prompts us think about the supposed enemy in a rather different way, to ask what happens when we read the texts from the side of the Philistines or the terminators. Reading from the underside of the Judges text, for instance, Susan Ackerman claims that the Philistines' retaliations against Samson, and indeed their attempts to bind him to stop more bloodshed, do not seem all that unreasonable, given his excessive use of violence against them. Moreover, Delilah's actions to stop Samson would very likely be viewed as honorable if written from the perspective of a Philistine.[42] Similarly, Josh Weisberg proposes that Skynet's actions to wipe out humanity seem ethically permissible given the threat that humanity poses to its very survival. In the voice of Skynet, he writes, "After all, the humans did just try to unplug me! And in the world of machines, that's tantamount to mur-

[39] Smith, "Delilah," 94.

[40] The terminators are often described in the films and the television series as being composed of "living tissue over metal endoskeleton." The television series explores the ambiguous distinctions between human and machine throughout both seasons. Sarah Connor's voiceover at the end of "The Demon Hand" (Season 1) suggests it is the possession of a soul that separates humans from machines. *T4* also explores these themes with the introduction of Marcus Wright, a human/terminator hybrid, further muddying the waters.

[41] This theme is teased out by contrasting human characters such as Sarah, who resists killing, and Derek, who kills in most cases without apparent remorse. Sarah thus tries not to cause harm, even to those who oppose her and threaten her son, but Derek, conversely, is comfortable with torture and killing.

[42] Ackerman, "What If Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?" 34.

der."[43] Within the convoluted logic and causality of time-travel narratives, the machines, including Cameron, would (somewhat paradoxically) never even begin to exist if the Connors had their way and were able to destroy Skynet before its inception. Thus, the very existence of the hostile Other lies in the hands of the humans themselves, raising the possibility here that one's actions determine not only one's status as friend or foe but also the possibility of that foe's existence in the first place.

This directs us to the nagging question, recapitulated in "Samson and Delilah," as to whether Cameron can be trusted when deep down she is programmed to kill John Connor and ensure the survival of Skynet. As these musings demonstrate, the ambiguities within Judges and its reception also play out in the Terminator universe. While afterlives in some ways terminate the original text from its context, the text continues to live on in other, often more ambiguous forms. Neither the original text—itself the product of a long process of reception and re-readings, a single moment in an endlessly flowing stream of creative invention and re-invention—nor its popular cultural adaptations are fixed, either in their forms or in their meanings. Ultimately, then, such interplay can assist in the production of further layers of meaning for both the biblical and popular cultural texts.

Conclusion

I have argued that placing popular culture texts in dialogue with the biblical texts and themes on which they draw constitutes a productive way of both observing culturally imposed semiotic constraints on the original texts and also constructing further meaning and meaning effects. This bi-directional approach to studying the relationship between the biblical text and its afterlives confirms how inseparable they really are from one another. While this approach to popular culture and the Bible is by no means limited to the Terminator franchise or to science fiction more generally, the focus on a single television episode has enabled me to consider a number of ways the texts relate to one another, and therefore observe some ways that the Bible functions within culture and also the ways in which these afterlives reflect back upon and modify the texts on which they draw.

[43] Josh Weisberg, "It Stands to Reason: Skynet and Self-Preservation," in *Terminator and Philosophy: I'll be Back, Therefore I Am*, ed. Richard Brown and Kevin S. Decker (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 40.

This analysis demonstrates that the relationship between an original text and its afterlives goes both ways. On the one hand, readers of the Bible often learn their interpretations from an afterlife that bears little enough resemblance to the original text, something that is perhaps a function of both an increasingly secular mainstream North American culture and a conservative-Evangelical subculture that views the Bible as fixed and inerrant. The *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* episode "Samson and Delilah" reinforces some of the common cultural understandings of the story of the judge Samson and his betrayer. At the same time, however, it challenges others, further blurring the lines between kin and Other that are already ambiguous within the biblical context. In doing so, it terminates the text from its original context and supplants it with a new interpretation, one of a great many afterlives that retroactively interact with that original context.

On the other hand, I have provided some examples of how further layers of meaning can be explored by teasing out the gaps that are formed by their intertextual linkage. While many of these associations might be unintended by the producers of *Chronicles*, the links allow us to delve into the unanswered ambiguities of the episode, and, in turn, construct a more in-depth theological understanding of the popular cultural text and/or the Terminator universe. This suggests the task of reception history is more interpretive than sometimes assumed: we do not merely "identify" pre-existing biblical allusions and appropriations and then narrate their effect, but rather "construct" these connections using our interpretive capacity as both critical and (somewhat) biblically literate readers. Our ability to do so is determined by our cultural and religious background and, perhaps even more importantly, by our pre-existing knowledge of texts, our own personal reference library, as it were. This also implies that, given the range of biblical literacy that exists today, the possibilities for multiple readings of these intertextual allusions are potentially endless.