

# Challenging Texts of the Old Testament

## TSA009 – Fr. Tony Milner

### INTRODUCTION

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion*

Dawkins, of course, is trying to make a particular case, and therefore chooses the ‘worst’ bits of the OT (and you could find a text which at least suggests that each of Dawkins’ adjectives is not entirely without foundation), ignoring the more attractive passages. However we are possibly at times guilty of the opposite failing – of ignoring what Lüdemann calls “The Dark side of the Bible”,<sup>1</sup> either by ignoring certain passages altogether, or by ignoring the problematic dimension of particular passages.

Take the Liturgy as an example – on Sundays we get a much bowdlerised version of the OT. On weekdays we get a more representative sample, but the most horrendous texts get ignored – you won’t find the gruesome story of the Levite and his concubine (Judges 19) anywhere in the Church’s liturgy – not even the Office of Readings (which only goes up to Judges 16 before skipping to the altogether more palatable story of Ruth). And the psalmody has been strangely cut back as well. A number of psalms have been omitted – 83<sup>2</sup> for example –, and others have been edited – the last three verses of Psalm 137 have mysteriously disappeared.<sup>3</sup>

Then again we happily recall the liberation of Israel from Egypt as part of our Holy Week liturgies, but usually ‘pass over’ the arguably rather horrendous action of God in slaughtering the first born of all the Egyptians – presumably including infants and children. Watson suggests we are in danger of becoming “neo-marcionites”.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, we acknowledge that selections have to be made. But we also hold that the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God,<sup>5</sup> and so we must surely be able to say that of even the most challenging texts we encounter. The aim of this seminar is to examine some of these texts and face the challenges directly, in the hopes of finding a way or ways of dealing with what is in many ways a very alien text. Or to put it in more provocative language, what have a late bronze age agrarian people and their warmongering god got to do with us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### THE ETHICS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

A number of recent scholars have drawn attention to the fact that much biblical scholarship of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was done by (usually white male American-European) academics largely speaking to other academics. In itself this is not a problem. It becomes a problem when these

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the subtitle of his book in the bibliography

<sup>2</sup> I will use the Hebrew numbering for psalms throughout, even though liturgical books follow the vulgate numbering, as most bibles follow the Hebrew.

<sup>3</sup> Despite this editing, a religious sister of my acquaintance once referred – I think tongue in cheek – to the communal celebration of the Office as “chanting Jewish war hymns to each other across the chapel”

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Text and Truth*, 127-176

<sup>5</sup> Cf. DV11

scholars presume that they have the ‘objective truth’ and that other ‘unsophisticated’ readers are (i) misinterpreting the texts and therefore (ii) ought to accept the truth as they are told it by the academics. Patte’s book on this subject (see bibliography) describes his journey away from this model. Fundamentally the understanding is that ‘scholarly’ biblical interpretation is at the service of ordinary biblical interpretation and not its master. Or to put it another way, the exegete is a servant of and responsible to the Church and its members. (and by extension to the wider world). This also means the exegete should pay attention to the questions ‘ordinary’ people ask when reading the Bible.

## METHODOLOGY

The first week will be spent looking at the nature of the problem we are addressing and reflecting on some potential approaches. We will also seek to identify those texts we want to look at in more detail and perhaps identify initial questions we have about them.

During weeks 2-10 we will take a particular text each week which we have decided is in some way(s) problematic. (I will take the first week on Dt 20:16-18 – on the Herem or ‘Ban’) The analysis of the text will then be twofold. In the first session we will proceed in a strictly ‘exegetical’ manner – seeking what the *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* means by the “literal sense” – “that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors”.<sup>6</sup> This is basically an historical critical quest, though literary analysis too can play its part. The central aim could be summed up in the phrase “what the text *meant*”. Central to this is the final text and its intended audience, which of course entails discerning the date of authorship of the text. Questions of the historicity of the events described will also be important, as will be the distinction between what a text presumes and what a text teaches. To give a relatively non-controversial example of this latter distinction, many texts, especially in Genesis and to some extent Job and some of the psalms, presume a Hebrew cosmology of a flat world covered by a dome (or firmament) which keeps out the waters above the dome (cf. Gen 1:6-8). We don’t accept that cosmology any more, but that would not lead us to say Gen 1 is wrong. We would likely conclude that the main message of Gen 1 is not precisely how the world came to be, or how it is constructed, but the fact that the world in all its ordered state is the creation of God.

Nevertheless although we may come to this type of conclusion we cannot ignore the fact that some people read the text differently and the text’s adoption of an unfortunate or ‘erroneous’ concept can lead people into what we would consider to be error. We will perhaps see this most starkly when we consider the ways in which marriage is used as a metaphor for the relationship of God and his people. Such considerations will form part of the second session each week.

In this second session we will identify some of the challenging questions raised by the text, and will try to tease out some suggested and possible responses to these questions. This is not an attempt to “explain them away”, though occasionally the problems may be more in the mind of the reader than in the text itself.<sup>7</sup> This we could characterise as the search for “what the text *means*”. It should be noted that we do not have to presume that a text has a single

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<sup>6</sup> *IBC* II.B.1

<sup>7</sup> Of course this may be a false distinction – does a text have any meaning in and of itself, or are meanings created in the process of reading? And to what extent does the ‘meaning’ or the text relate to the intention of the (human) author? And how do we see meaning in relation to the Divine author? These and other hermeneutical questions will be with us throughout the seminar.

meaning, in the same way as the Fathers saw that there were several dimensions to the *sensus plenior*.

Our principle guide will be *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, along, of course, with *Dei Verbum*. The Exegesis section will be drawing in the main from the more historical methods described in section I. The second session will draw more from section II on hermeneutics and III on Catholic interpretation, together with the more ‘hermeneutical’ methods described in section I.

For these sessions you will need to work in pairs to some extent, as the person presenting the second session needs to have some idea what the person presenting the first session is going to say about the text, both to avoid duplication and to ensure that the sessions are reasonably coherent.

Each presenter should prepare an A4 sheet summarising the presentation – that is, in the first session giving an outline of the main results of critical exegesis, and in the second session giving an outline of key interpretive questions and some of the ways they might be approached. In both cases a brief bibliography should be provided.

## POTENTIAL APPROACHES

In the following paragraphs I will outline very briefly some of the possible approaches one could take when approaching challenging texts. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor is this list meant to be in any way exhaustive.

### Approaches which involve some level of rejection

A ‘Marcionite’ approach simply rejects all or part of the Old Testament. Obviously we cannot do this if we wish to retain a Catholic approach. However there are other, more subtle, approaches which may have something to contribute. *Liberationist* (and feminist) approaches, for example, would reject any interpretation of the text which is not essentially liberating of human beings. This can also tie in with the distinction between what is presumed and what is taught. The former does not have to be taken on board, any more than we have to accept biblical cosmology as a scientific description of the world. St. Augustine made this point in *De Genesi ad litteram 1:19*. Indeed Philo did something similar in his commentaries – following the Greek principle of taking their mythology as allegorical and applying that to the Scriptures. The rejection in this sort of approach is at the level of interpretation, not text.

Two questions remain – where do we get the criteria for rejection? Obvious sources are the New Testament and the *regula fidei*. Not that the NT is without its problems, and the *regula fidei* itself has been in some ways informed by the text. One at least has to be aware of the dangers of subjectivism.

### Approaches which involve some level of re-interpretation

The ‘*New Historicist*’ approach places more emphasis on the historical situation at the time the text was composed rather than the history of the events described. So for instance if the Deuteronomistic History was written in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE then troublesome texts such as the Ban texts are not to be seen so much as stories of what God actually told the Israelites to do in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as encouragements to faithfulness and unity during the reform of king Josiah (cf. Rowlet, below). *Narrative* approaches can also follow this pattern – so the

dialogue of God with Satan in the book of Job is not intended to give a description of how God behaves, but rather sets the ‘narrative background’ or the rest of the book.

These are really no more than attempts to arrive at a deeper understanding of “what the text meant”. They do, however, imply that the reader of the biblical text needs a certain level of sophistication to understand it.

Other more radical approaches of this nature involve downplaying the history almost to the point of denying its relevance, and instead seeing the texts in purely *symbolic*, *allegorical* or *typological* ways. This, as we have seen, can also involve a level of rejection – at least in terms of rejecting the literal meaning of the text.

**Approaches which involve seeing the OT as in some sense provisional or incomplete.**

*Dispensationalism* essentially divides time into different eras, saying that what was once OK is no longer acceptable. There is some justification for this in Hebrews 1:1-2 and to some extent Mt 5. However, while it is clear that there have been various phases to God’s revelation, it is not entirely clear that this implies that ethics have changed drastically. Mt 5 does not essentially change the teachings, it just relocates their foundation. Lüdemann puts the point rather forcefully when speaking about the Ban

The fact remains: the command to exterminate is extremely offensive, even if at that time it was given by God in a highly personal way; or, more precisely, even if people at that time believed that God was ordering extermination. Anyone who accuses me at this point of unhistorical thinking ('one cannot measure an alien time by modern standards') is asked to imagine the acts performed at the ban and their consequences, and to think through in detail what crimes were really perpetrated here: the deliberate slaughter of infants, children, women and men. Only then will they also understand the emotional aspect of my question how such acts can still have anything to do with the mercy of God and why the biblical theologians can so quickly pass over from such a crime against humanity allegedly ordained by God to the order of the day.<sup>8</sup>

*Supersessionism* argues that the OT is superseded by the NT and therefore we can ignore the bits that don’t seem in accord with the Gospel, Mt 5:17-20 notwithstanding! But that is really only a subtle form of Marcionism.

Dei Verbum proposes a somewhat different approach: “the books of the Old Testament... therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable” (n.14) “These books, though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary, nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy” (n.15). “The books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and in turn shed light on it and explain it” (n.16). Obviously there is some scope here for further exploration. Notable, however, is the understanding that the OT has value in itself, and not just as a prolegomena to the NT. Some of the authors we will look at who struggle with OT texts will be Jewish (e.g. Niditch), and that gives a different nuance to the questions.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Unholy in Holy Scripture*, 54

**Approaches which put the onus back on the reader**

The most straightforward form of this is what is sometimes termed *divine voluntarism*. That is to say, good and evil are defined simply as the doing or resisting of the will of God, and God's will has no foundation other than itself. Thus if God says to Saul that he must slaughter all the Amalekites then not only is Saul justified in doing so, he would be committing sin not to (cf. 1 Sam 15). This, however, raises not a few basic questions about the concept of good and evil and the place of human reason in the search for the will of God.

More generally, it is important to ask "is the problem with the text, or with me" – The need for a certain docility before the Scriptures is, of course, necessary. Karl Barth placed quite a lot of emphasis of the 'otherness' of the biblical text, that it comes to us as challenge, as the Word of God. Catholic theology would not look at it in quite the dialectical terms of Barth, but at the same time we need to recognise our desire to 'tame' the biblical text.

Perhaps there is another way. This is not much more than a speculative suggestion at this stage, but perhaps we can see our negative reaction to certain texts, in the light of our faith, the NT, and the Tradition of the Church, as part of its revealing power. The text reveals to us by being objectionable in some way. Maybe we can work out a hermeneutic that moves in this direction as we study the various texts.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY<sup>9</sup>

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*The World of Biblical Literature*, New York, Basic Books, 1992  
*Robert Alter was one of the early writers to advocate a return to reading biblical texts as a whole and as literature*
- Anderson, Cheryl B. *Women and Violence: Critical Theory and the Construction of Gender in the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomistic Law* Sheffield, JSOTS 394, 2004
- Aristotle *On Interpretation* c. 350BCE cf. [classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/interpretation.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/interpretation.html)  
*More about grammar than anything else, but makes a few interesting remarks about the relationship between texts, speech and 'mental experience'*
- Barton, John *Ethics and the Old Testament*, London, SCM 1998  
*This is actually the text of a lecture series – very short and readable and introduces some useful questions and ideas. Barton also co-wrote what is almost the standard work on Biblical Interpretation with Robert Morgan listed below*
- Bauman, Gerlinde *Love and Violence: Marriage as a Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Book* Collegeville, Michael Glazier, 2003 (ET .from German original *Liebe und Gewalt* Stuttgart, 2000)  
*More comprehensive and detailed than Weems (see below), it goes through all the prophetic books in chronological order looking at the how the metaphor of marriage is used by the prophets, with a particular eye to the implications for the understanding of appropriate human relationships. It has a very useful survey of recent research in chapter 1. Uses a fair amount of untransliterated Hebrew in the later sections, but always gives a translation when it uses a word the first time.*
- Bekkenkamp, Jonneke & Sherwood, Yvonne (eds.) *Sanctified Agression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence* Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2003.  
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- Booth, Wayne C *The Rhetoric of Fiction* Chicago University Press, 1983  
*The Company we Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988  
*Neither of these is about Biblical texts, but about narrative texts in general. However they have been very influential in the narrative analysis of Biblical texts. The latter is of particular interest to us as we consider the challenges we face in describing disturbing stories as Scripture.*
- Brown, Jeannine K. *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* Grand Rapids, Baker, 2007  
*More of a 'how to' book than other titles on hermeneutics, comes from a fairly conservative evangelical perspective, but has received good reviews*

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<sup>9</sup> You will note that quite a few of the works listed come from what may be termed a 'feminist' school of thought. This is primarily because it is feminist scholarship that has been at the forefront of this field of research in recent decades.

- Bruggemann, Walter *Revelation and Violence: A Study in Contextualization* Wisconsin, Marquette University Press, 1986  
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*Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* Minneapolis, Fortress, 1993  
*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* Minneapolis, Fortress, 1997  
*This is now arguably the standard work on this subject – there has been nothing on this scale since von Rad's two volume Theology of the OT – which were published in German in 1957 and 1960*
- Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible*: London, Yale, 1995  
*A series of essays presented as the work of 10 biblical scholars introducing some contemporary approaches to the Bible*
- Carroll, Robert *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* London, SPCK, 1991.
- Childs, Brevard S. *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* London, SCM, 1985
- Fitzmyer, Joseph *The Biblical Commissions Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church": Text and Commentary* Roma, PIB Bress, 1995  
*The document is, of course, essential reading for this seminar. The commentary is very useful as Fitzmyer was a member of the commission and hence this is an 'insiders' view.*
- Gadamer, Hans Georg, *Truth and Method* 2nd rev. tr J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. New York: Crossroad, 1989. (ET of *Wahrheit und Methode*, 1960 41986)  
*Whether it is easier to find out about Gadamer by reading Gadamer or by reading what others have written is a debatable point, but this is the key work of this key thinker.*
- Girard, René *Violence and the Sacred* London, Atone, 1988. (ET of *La Violence et le Sacre*, Paris, 1972)  
*Not about Biblical Interpretation at all, but Girard's theories have since been drawn upon by many biblical scholars, and so this is quite an important work. He has written much more since! A more recent work is I See Satan Fall like Lightning (Orbis 2001) which adds a Christian dimension to his thought.*
- Goldingay, John *Models for Scripture* Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994  
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- Graffy, Adrian *Alive and Active: The Old Testament Beyond 2000* Dublin, Columba, 1999
- Grant, Robert M. & Tracy, David *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* London, SCM, 21984  
*A very useful introduction but of course does not cover the developments of the past quarter of a century*
- Helmer, Christine & Petrey, Taylor G *Biblical Interpretation: History, Context, And Reality* Atlanta, SBL Symposium, 2005  
*Essays in English and German – includes an article (in English!) on the Joseph narrative.*
- Helmer, Christine & Higbe, Charlene T. *The Multivalence of Biblical Texts and Theological Meanings* Atlanta, SBL Symposium, 2006  
*A Collection of Essays about possible pluralities of meanings in biblical texts – includes articles on Gen 22 (The Sacrifice of Abraham) and Isaiah, as well as a general introduction to the concepts.*

- Hobbs, T. R. *A Time for War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament* Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1989  
*This is primarily a search into what the text meant – historical critical analysis – but gives some thought on what the text means – interpretation for today.*
- Ipgrave, Michael *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together* London, Church House Publishing, 2004
- Jeanrond, Werner G. *Jeanrond Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* New York, Crossroads, 1991  
*A key work in late 20<sup>th</sup> Century theory of hermeneutics – and fairly short!*
- Lüdemann, Gerd *The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible* London, SCM, 1997 (ET of *Das Unheilig in der Heiligen Schrift* Stuttgart 1996)
- Milner, Anthony “The Bible and Conflict” in *Scripture Bulletin* XXXV(2005), 85-94
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*This volume is a fairly comprehensive collection of magisterial teaching about Scripture and its place and use within the Church.*
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- Niditch, Susan *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* Oxford, OUP, 1993.  
*Covers some similar territory to Hobbs (above) and von Rad (below) but – as the subtitle indicates, with much greater attention to the ethical questions,*
- Patte, Daniel *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation, a Reevaluation* Louisville, WJK, 1995  
*This is a very readable and very useful book. Patte (a semiologist) tells the story of how he came to a new understanding of his task as an exegete and his responsibilities, not just to the ‘academy’, but to all who read and interpret the Bible.*
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- Reventlow, Henning Graf *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* London, SCM, 1985 (ET of *Hauptprobleme der alttestamentlich Theologie im 20 Jahrhundert* Darmstadt, 1982)

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*Is the book Joshua more to do with consolidating the power of Josiah than attitudes to non Israelites in the land? Read and find out! (but you will need some Hebrew for the latter sections).*
- Ricoeur, Paul *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* Minneapolis, Fortress, 1995.  
*Paul Ricoeur is of course one of the most important writers on Hermeneutics of the past decades. He is also one of the most prolific so choosing a representative text is not easy. This is, in fact, an anthology, with a substantial introduction, edited by Mark I Wallace.*
- Ruston, Robert *The Violent God of the Old Testament* London, Pax Christi, 1989  
*At 27 pages this is really a pamphlet*
- Schwartz, Regina M. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* University of Chicago Press, 1997
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* Boston, Beacon Press, 1984  
*Perhaps the key work in which feminist biblical criticism breaks into the mainstream.*  
*Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* Fortress, Minneapolis, 1999  
*Another important work which is principally a discussion and proposal about how biblical studies should move out of the academy and become more inclusive and transformative.*
- Sjöberk, Mikael *Wrestling with Textual Violence: The Jephthah Narrative in Antiquity and Modernity* Sheffield, Phoenix Press, 2006  
*Analyses the story of the Amorite war and the sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter in Judges 10-12 and five retellings, two ancient, two contemporary and the oratorio by Haydn, to look at how different people have tried to make sense of this fairly dreadful story*
- Ska, Jean Louis "Our Fathers Have Told Us": *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* Rome, PIB press, 1990
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*Building on his earlier work, The Two Horizons (1980) this is a pretty comprehensive survey of biblical hermeneutics, working towards Thistleton's own proposal. Not an easy read but worth the effort.*
- Tribble, Phyllis *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* Minneapolis, Fortress, 1978  
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*A brief work analysing four rather disturbing stories from the OT which illustrate maltreatment of women – A kind of sequel to the more theoretical and more 'hopeful' God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality.*
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*Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1997

Weems, Renita J. *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* Minneapolis, Fortress, 1995

*An accessible introduction to the problem of the prophetic images of the relationship God to his people as a marriage,*

West, Gerald *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in a South African Context* Maryknoll, Orbis 1995

## **JOURNAL ARTICLES**

Trying to produce a remotely comprehensive list of useful articles would take far too long I'm afraid. However by way of general recommendation there are three journals which are more likely to contain the sorts of studies we are looking for.

*Semeia*, published between 1974 and 2001, described itself as "An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism" and it is the place where a lot of contemporary hermeneutic theories were applied. Each issue had a particular theme. In 2001 it evolved into *Semeia Studies*. Of course what was *Avant Garde* in 1974 is almost mainstream now (the first issue was titled *A Structuralist Approach to the Parables*)

*Biblical Theology Bulletin* because of its theological brief tends to have more articles which look at the broader theological questions about texts.

*The Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* also tends to publish more articles which look at questions of interpretation than other, more strictly exegetical, journals.

## **COMMENTARIES**

Once again I cannot list all the commentaries here. The well known series (e.g. *Anchor Bible*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, *Berit Olam*) will usually provide the basic historical critical information we need, though I suggest that the person preparing the first part of each session consult at least two substantial commentaries in order to get a flavour of the scholarship, and try to ensure at least one is a reasonably up-to-date work, so that you will be appraised of recent scholarship. The *Ancient Christian Commentary* series is probably more useful for the interpretive than the exegetical task