

Militant Piety: Violence as a Sacred Duty

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Abstract

This paper examined the development of Christianity from the Old Testament to the New Testament through military piety: violence as a sacred duty. It also examined in detail what the Old Testament says about military piety as a sacred duty and considered this as a guide for future generations in the nation of Israel. The books of Deuteronomy and Joshua were critically examined with a view to understanding instructions purported to have been given to Moses and Joshua by God to exterminate other nations. Citations from the Old Testament were also analysed with a view to understanding the great theme of the book of Deuteronomy that God has saved and blessed his chosen people, whom he loves; his people are to remember this, and love and obey him, so that they may have life and continued blessings, (Good News Bible: 170). The Theology of conquest, the promised land, chosen people and laissez faire where also explored and analysed. Reference was also made to the Bible versus oppressed nations taking the Dutch Reformed Church and the apartheid system in South Africa as an example. The paper also examined the concept of 'Holy War' as understood by Moses and Joshua and present day Israel. The Authority of the Bible was also put under introspection. In the light of military piety as a sacred duty and the 'Holy War', the paper asked these pertinent questions concerning the Bible: How does scripture apply to the people or nations where they are? How does the text address current issues? Does the understanding of the bible lead to socio-political transformation? The paper concluded by calling on God to listen to cries from all people irrespective of whether they are in the promised land or not, they are a chosen nation or not, who call upon Him for help by quoting from Habakkuk, (1:2 – 4)

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Introduction

In any detailed study of the Old Testament, a concern which frequently comes to the fore is the applicability of its directives to later generations. Do the ordinances

of God, given in the distant past to ancient Israel apply to Jews in the twenty-first century? Are they to be regarded by Christians as divinely inspired commandments valid for all times? Naturally the concern is not with the Ten Commandments and with the laws that define an ideal world in which there would be no poor. The problem arises when the reader is confronted with what any civilized twenty-first century society would regard as morally reprehensible passages. How are faithful followers of the God of the Bible to react to xenophobic directives which call upon the Israelites to commit appalling atrocities on fellow human beings? Can anything be learned from the misinterpretations of the past? To what extent can authority be granted to abhorrent texts? How are commands to commit genocide in God's name to be interpreted today? In short: How does one handle a holy book? In an attempt to address these questions, the paper considers first the way in which dogma has influenced the understanding and application of the biblical text. The case of apartheid South Africa stands as a stark warning against an overly simplistic acceptance of the argument for institutional pluralism.

The Dictates of Dogma Chosen people

There is a saying in South Africa: 'When the white man came to our country he had the Bible and we had the land. The white man said to us, "Let us pray". After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible', (Mofokeng, 1988). Black South Africans and many other people in the region recognize the crucial part played by the Bible in their exploitation by white colonialists, (see McCrone, 1937, Loubser, 1987, Mofokeng, 1988). For the indigenous population, conversion to Christianity meant embracing a book which very quickly became an instrument of oppression, (Loubser, 1987, Prior, 1997). This view is substantiated when we consider the use which the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) made of Scripture to justify its policies with regard to the black population. In 1948, the year when apartheid became the official policy of the state, the DRC proudly proclaimed: 'As a church, we have always worked purposefully for the separation of the races. In this regard apartheid can rightfully be called a church policy (quoted in Boesak, 1983:6). It could be 'rightfully' so regarded because, according to the DRC, it could be justified theologically. "Although theology has not been the main source of apartheid, it can by no means be understood without a knowledge of the way in which Afrikaners experience and worship God. In this context the "apartheid bible"

played a very significant role, (Cloubser, 1987:xviii). The divine sanction of apartheid came predominantly from the Old Testament, especially from the book of Deuteronomy, (Deut. 7:1-6; 20:16-18; 25:19).

Deuteronomy, which purports to be God's instructions given by Moses in a series of sermons to the Israelites before they invaded Canaan, is a book of contradictions, (cf Deut.5:17 and 7:2-3, 16). On the one hand it is a positive and irenic document. The numerous laws concerning those who live a marginal existence have made a favourable impression on most exegetes. They regard its humanitarian concern for widows, orphans, slaves and resident aliens to be worthy of commendation. The book marks the highest point in the history of Israelite religion because it is designed to announce a utopia by making poverty history. Its laws call for empathy with fellow human beings. As Weinfeld has shown, it is one of the great repositories of humanistic values in Scripture (1972 : 282-297).

On the other hand, Deuteronomy is extremely xenophobic, (Mofokeng, 1988). Because the Israelites are a minority in Canaan and constantly at risk from forces beyond their control, the choice between survival or annihilation, life and death, is forever before them. Foreigners who co-inhabit the promised land will jeopardize the chosen people's survival. They, (foreigners), must be given the inferior status of hewers of wood and drawers of water (Deut. 29:11). The nation's ability to insulate itself from such a potentially harmful influence makes it highly intolerant of outsiders. The word 'enemies' occurs over twenty-five times in thirty-four chapters. When God delivers the surrounding hostile nations into his people's hands, Moses gives explicit instructions to Israel how to deal with them, instructions which must be observed faithfully if the nation is to preserve its purity:

You must exterminate them. You must not make an alliance with them or spare them. You must not intermarry with them...You are to devour all the nations which the Lord your God is giving over to you. Show none of them mercy. (Deut. 7:2-3, 16).

The divinely inspired mission of the Israelites must be one of destruction.

The spirit of xenophobia is given added impetus by the doctrine of election. The nation is reminded time and again that it is a people 'holy' to the Lord, who chose it 'out of all the peoples of the earth to be his special possession' (Duet 7:6). The choice is ratified by means of a covenant, which promises deliverance from danger, victory over enemies and a land the Israelites could call their own. The inference is clear. God has his favourite 'chosen' nation, all other peoples are of lesser importance.

The elect possess a unique spiritual destiny, which emphasises their singular righteousness and their superiority over adherents to other religions. The corollary of such favouritism is suffering, which the 'not chosen' are destined to endure. This belief in divine election is characteristic of adversary situations and small sects. It justifies the rejection, and even destruction, of all that threatens the purity or sanctity of the group. In the words of Wyschogrod: 'If God elects one individual or group, there is someone else whom He does not elect and that other is left to suffer His exclusion' (1983 : 60).

When the theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa sought to defend apartheid during the first half of the twentieth century, they had recourse to Deuteronomy. Its description of ancient Israel was relevant to their social situation and suited their vested interests. Boer Calvinism was based on the plain sense of the Bible, influenced by any critical handling of the text. In sermons and official church statements, the laws of Deuteronomy were related directly to the South African situation. 'A naïve reading and application of concepts from the book of Deuteronomy' provided the scriptural basis for the policy of apartheid (Deist 1994 p.26). Three examples must suffice of how the Torah supplied norms and principles for rulers who sought to organise society along the lines of 'separate development'.

First, the division of the nations. 'When the Most High gave each nation its heritage, when He divided all mankind, He laid down the boundaries for people's according to the number of the sons of Israel (Deut. 32:8). This was taken to mean that separation between different peoples is divinely ordained. God was the 'Great Divider', as the story of Creation in Genesis 1:3-19 demonstrates. Because apartheid is of God, according to the apartheid bible, humans must not seek to unite what the Creator has divided. The separation of peoples is based on the Bible, whereas equality is a human invention. So instead of equality the Dutch Reformed Church spoke of pluriformity.

Second, the legality of discrimination, 'You must not eat anything that has died a natural death. You may give it to aliens residing among you, and they may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner, but you are a people holy to the Lord your God' (Deut. 14:21). For members of the Dutch reformed Church, this was biblical proof that people are unequal. The same deduction is made on the basis of the law which allows the charging of interest on loans to foreigners, but not to a fellow Israelite (Deut. 23:20).

Finally, the recognition of natural distinctions. 'You are not to plough with an ox and a donkey yoked together. You are not to wear clothes woven with two kinds of yarn, wool and flax together' (Deut. 22:10-11). The original idea in these verses seems to be that natural distinctions should be disregarded. The Dutch Reformed Church interpreted them as a prohibition against mixed marriages. If the Bible teaches that divisions exist in nature, how much more does this apply to people? This text, together with the law against intermarriage between Israelites and Canaanites (Deut. 7:3), was the basis for the Immorality Act in South Africa, which prohibited marriage between blacks and whites. Like the Israelites, the Afrikaners had to be kept pure.

The policy of separate development legitimized by the state and supported by the church was dictated by dogma, which in turn was founded upon the scriptural concept of election. The Dutch Calvinists who arrived in South Africa in 1652 identified themselves with ancient Israel. They regarded themselves as God's chosen people. Consequently, the biblical narrative became meaningful and relevant. Like the Israelites who went from Palestine to Egypt to escape persecution (OM : 7). Like the Hebrew slaves in Egypt suffering under foreign rule, they suffered when the British captured the colony in 1806. Like the Israelites in the desert seeking a heaven from oppression, the Boers went on the Great Trek to find a promised land in the north, beyond British administration, because they were disgusted at Britain's abolition of slavery. Like the people of Israel, the white South Africans would achieve their goal only by violent means. In the words of Boesak, writing during the apartheid era: 'We still have, in South Africa, a system of racism that is maintained by violence... the systematic violence inherent in apartheid society' (1986 : 43-44).

Like Israel in Canaan, a faithful minority whose religion was threatened by paganism, the Boers kept themselves apart from the 'Kaffirs' (that is, heathens) who surrounded them.

The Dutch settlers regarded the indigenous peoples as culturally inferior heathens destined by God to be the 'hewers of wood and the drawers of water' for their superior masters. The settlers prospered; the indigenous peoples and imported slaves suffered. The Christian faith seemed to provide the rationale necessary to justify the situation. (de Gruchy, 2004 : 172).

The Boers were angered not only at the freeing of the slaves, but also because the indigenes were being placed on an equal footing with Christians, contrary to the

laws of God and the natural distinction of race and religion, so that it was intolerable for any decent Christian to bow beneath such a yoke; wherefore we withdrew in order to preserve our doctrines in purity (MacCrone, 1937 : 126, quoting Steenkamp).

And, as in the case of the Israelites, the preservation of racial and religious purity depended on strict adherence to the laws of God, as interpreted by their own theologians. It was assumed that God would reward and protect those who kept the command to exercise separate development, because such a policy reflected his wisdom and will.

Holy war

On 13 September 1993, President Clinton introduced the Israeli premier, Yitzhak Rabin, and the Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, to a waiting world. The occasion was hailed as a breakthrough. The image of the two leaders shaking hands on the White House lawn is probably etched on the memory of many. Both pledged to work for a peace shaped by the values of the Qur'an and the Bible. According to the *Washington Post*, 13 September 1993, Clinton had been unable to sleep the previous night because he was worried that his speech was not up to scratch. He got up at 3am and opened his Bible. He read the whole of Joshua and parts of the New Testament before going back to sleep. His speech, the following morning contained a mixture of biblical exhortations and clever political moves, (*Washington Post*, 14 September 1993). We do not know whether or not he suffered nightmares after reading one of the most blood-curdling narratives in the history of civilization, but there must surely be more appropriate literature for an influential world leader who cannot sleep.

Joshua is presented in the book named after him as Moses's successor, appointed by God to complete his mentor's work. The first half of the book (2:1-12:24) describes the conquest of Canaan. In accordance with the rules of Holy War, the key cities were 'put to the ban': that is, they were completely destroyed and all their inhabitants slaughtered. The final editor sums up the campaign in a matter-of-fact way:

The Israelites...put every living soul to the sword until they had destroyed everyone; they did not leave alive anyone that drew breath. The Lord had laid his commands on his servant Moses, and Moses laid these same commands on Joshua, and Joshua carried them out. Not one of the commands laid on Moses by the Lord was left unfulfilled (Joshua 11:14-15).

In his attempt to ethnically cleanse Canaan, Joshua was only obeying orders: so was Moses. In his farewell address shortly before his death, Joshua reminded the people why they had engaged in Holy War. He justified his acceptance of the mandate for genocide given in Deuteronomy 7:1-3 on two grounds. First, in order to provide a safe heaven for the Israelites after their escape from Egyptian bondage, God himself had driven out the indigenous population in order to give Israel a home: 'he dispossessed them to make way for you, and you occupied their land' (Josh. 23:5). Canaan supplied *Lebensraum* (living room) for the liberated slaves. In this promised land they would be expected to live as the covenant community in accordance with the precepts of the Torah.

Second, the ethnic cleansing of Canaan would ensure that the Israelites did not commit apostasy. Because syncretism threatened 'to destroy Israel's identity as the people of Yahweh... the suppression of apostasy' was viewed as 'an act of national self-preservation' (Patrick, 1985:107). Anyone who encouraged or was engaged in prohibited religious practices must be purged from the land (Deut. 13:1-18; cf. Exodus 22:20). This was necessary because pagan neighbours would draw the children of the Israelites away from worshipping Yahweh (Deut. 7:4) and teach them to imitate their abominable practices (Deut. 20:18). In the words of Clements:

The particular horror of the Deuteronomists was that vestiges of the beliefs and practices of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan should continue. These are made the object of the strictest prohibitions because of their offensive nature, and any participation in them is made a capital crime. It is on this account that the pre-Israelite inhabitants are threatened with extermination. (1968:35; see also Stern, 1991:221).

Genocide was a precautionary measure against idolatry: it was the only way of preserving religious purity. Should some Canaanites escape annihilation and continue to live in the land, Joshua warns the Israelites that any association with them will bring severe penalties. If you associate with them and they with you, then be sure that the Lord will not continue to drive out those peoples from before you. They will be snares to entrap you, whips for your backs, and barbed hooks in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the Lord your God has given you (Josh. 23:12-13).

President Clinton was not the only influential American to read the scriptural account of the Holy War waged by Israel against the Canaanites at a significant moment in world history: the early Puritans also found it relevant. The first settlers

had come to North America to escape religious persecution in England. They identified themselves with the people of Israel and applied biblical texts describing the conquest of Canaan to their own situation. They justified their actions by means of analogies from the Old Testament. Like the Israelites, they needed *Lebensraum* and dreamed of a promised land; they embarked on 'an errand in the wilderness' to find 'a Western Canaan', as they called the World, where they could practice their religion without censure. But between the dream and its realization were the Indians. As God's chosen people, the Puritans believed that they had a divinely appointed destiny to convert the indigenous population. But although the missionaries had some success in New England, on the whole the Indians resisted evangelization (Noll, 2002:36). Like the Canaanites in the time of Joshua, those who persisted in their paganism were regarded by the Puritan preachers as 'snares...whips...and barbed hooks'. They were begotten of Satan. 'In Joseph Mede's view, America was uniquely the land of the devil, so the Indians were a satanic parody of the Puritans, the Chosen People of the devil as the Israelites, and then the Puritans, were the Chosen People of God' (Silverman, 1985:239). God's elect had no option but to annihilate them.

On 1 September 1689, Cotton Mather preached a sermon in the Old North Church, Boston, where he served as assistant pastor to his father, Increase. The younger Mather was an influential champion of the Congregationalist cause in New England, and would have been an outstanding individual in any era.

He was ostentatiously pious, shamelessly self-promoting, overbearingly moralistic, and his 469 separate books and pamphlets suggest that he never had a thought he felt unworthy of publication. (In fact, however, his largest work, a massive reference work and commentary on the Bible, has never been published). Yet superficial treatments do not take the measure of this extraordinarily learned and preternaturally active clergyman (Noll, 1992:87).

Mather's congregation on that September morning consisted mainly of soldiers fighting the native inhabitants of New England. In a sermon entitled 'Soldiers Counsell'd and Comforted', the preacher told his listeners that they should think of themselves as Israel in the desert confronted by the Amalekites, the descendants of Esau, who first resisted the Israelite invaders on the borders of the promised land. Because of their hostility they were singled out for destruction by God. As soon as the Israelites entered Canaan they 'must without fail blot out all memory of Amalek from under heaven' (Deut. 25:19). The soldiers listened with rapt attention as Mather identified his congregation as the New Israel of God, and the

Indians who refused to convert with the Amalekites, 'a treacherous and bar-barous enemy ... the veriest tigers'. He exhorted the troops to exterminate them:

Turn not back – until they are consumed; wound them that they shall not be able to arise. Though they cry, let there be none to save them. But beat them small as the dust before the wind and cast them out as the dirt, in the streets (Silverman, 1985:237).

The genocide of the Indians is justified not only on practical grounds, because they murder Christians, but also on dogmatic grounds. Those who resist the gospel must be disinherited to make room for God's elect. Mather had no difficulty at all applying the method of Joshua to his own situation, because he believed that the policy of the Puritans had divine approval. The drive by God's people to find a new land where it could preserve its purity had its Scripture and was dictated by Dogma.

Promised Land

On 25 February 1994, Dr Baruch Goldstein, an ultra-orthodox Jew of American extraction, entered a mosque in his home town of Hebron in Israeli-occupied territory carrying a machine gun. Before he was overpowered and beaten to death, he had shot twenty-nine Muslim worshippers as they knelt in prayer. Today the assassin's grave in a park outside Hebron looks like a garden of remembrance. His massive gravestone, illuminated at night by ornamental lights, refers to him as a saint. The inscription reads:

'Having given his life on behalf of the Jewish people, its Torah and its ancestral homeland, he was an innocent, pure-hearted individual'. Pilgrims hold services and light memorial candles. Supporters kiss the tomb and stop to pray. At his funeral, Rabbi Jacob Perrin commended his action by stating in his widely reported sermon that 'one million Arabs are not worth a Jewish fingernail'.

Another religious leader described him as a 'royal martyr'. When Goldstein's son became a bar mitzvah two years later, the officiating rabbi said to him: 'Jacob Jair, follow in your father's footsteps. He was a righteous man and a great hero' (*Jerusalem Report*, 12 December 1996:10).

The British Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, condemned the massacre in no uncertain terms by declaring that 'violence is evil. Violence committed in the name of God is doubly evil. Violence against those engaged in worshipping God is unspeakably evil'. Reflecting on Sack's reaction, Rabbi Norman Solomon commented thus:

The problem with Sacks' position is that, much as we may concur with the sentiment, and however many Biblical and Talmudic citations we may find in praise of peace, we are left with numerous texts that *do* summon us to violence in the name of God, and this makes it difficult to argue against Perrin and the like on purely *textual* grounds (1997:8).

Goldstein and his supporters justified the massacre on the grounds that the Palestinians should not be occupying land which God gave to Jews. Palestine was by divine right a Jewish birthright. But when Theodor Herzl insisted that the only solution to the plight of European Jews was the recovery of their national identity, his concept of a Jewish state was based on nationalism, rather than religion. During the First Zionist Congress of 1897 he spoke of the distinctive nationality of the Jews, not of their divine right to a piece of land. Nevertheless, there are biblical overtones in what he said. For example, he recognized that the notions of a chosen people and of a return to the promised land were potent factors in mobilizing support. Furthermore, like Joshua, he gave no consideration to the rights of the indigenous population. In his diary he wrote:

When we occupy the land we must expropriate gently the private property on the estates assigned to us. We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly (Patai, 1960, vol. 1:87-8).

The needs and rights of the native population were to be ignored. Initially, Herzl's dream was firmly rejected by orthodox Jews on religious grounds. The return to Zion could be accomplished only by the Messiah, who would come in God's good time. Auto-emancipation contradicted the religious tradition and therefore violated the Torah. But during the second half of the twentieth century, after the Holocaust and the wars of 1967 and 1974, Zionism became a compelling alternative, even for the orthodox.

In present day Israel, the occupation of Palestine has strong support because it is viewed as being consistent with Torah and prophecy. Zionism has been given a theological foundation. The great majority of orthodox rabbis in Israel have denounced the so-called 'peace process' between Israel and the Palestinians because they recognize that the Bible, in Ben Gurion's famous phrase, is their 'sacrosanct

title-deed' to the land. They now accept that the Bible legitimizes the Jewish state, not only establishing its borders (Genesis 15:18-20; cf. Deut. 1:7), but also by stating that the exiled Jews will again live within them. The map reading provided in Genesis 15:18-20 is unambiguous: the promised land will one day extend from 'the river of Egypt to the Great River, the river Euphrates'. It was to this land that God would bring back the Jews of the Dispersion, an assurance repeatedly given by the prophets: 'I shall take you from among the nations, and gather you from every land, and bring you to your homeland' (Ezekiel 36:24, cf. 20:42; Jeremiah 29:14; Zechariah 10:10).

An influential colonizing group is Gush Emunim (Block of the Faithful) formed in 1974. Their interpretation of the Bible, 'which equates the present-day Arab inhabitants of the Land with the Amalekites ... who lived there in Moses's and Joshua's day, has seeped into current ultra-orthodox theology' (Landau, 1993:159). An example of the extreme measures they advocate against Palestinians is to be found in an article published in a student newspaper in 1980 by Rabbi Yisrael Hess, a former campus rabbi of Bar-Han University in Tel Aviv. Entitled 'The commandment of genocide in the Torah', the article states: 'The day is not far when we shall all be called to this holy war, this commandment of the annihilation of the Amalekites' (quoted in Masalha, 1997:208). The commandment to which Hess refers is Deuteronomy 25:19, which is highlighted by Samuel in his instructions to Saul: 'Go now, fall upon the Amalekites, destroy them...Spare no one; put them all to death, men and women, children and babes in arms, herds and flocks, camels and donkeys' (1 Samuel 15:3). The rabbi regards the Palestinians as the 'Amalekites of today'. Like their ancient forebears, they should be shown no mercy. But even if the modern Amalek is not annihilated, Jewish extremists, to quote Hess, will seek to 'settle a million Jews on the West Bank before the turn of the millennium so that territorial compromise becomes impossible and eventual annexation becomes the obvious conclusion'. The Palestinians' claims to land they have occupied for centuries are dismissed out of hand on the basis of a fundamentalist reading of Scripture, (Hess, 1980).

Zionist-Orthodox Jews also believe that a third, temple, reconstructed on the site of the first two, is essential as a necessary prelude to the coming of the Messiah. "The rebuilding will actually hasten his arrival; if they build, he will come. Zealous extremists believe that their action will force God's hand. But before the rebuilding can begin, the Islamic presence must be removed. The Messiah cannot come to a site which is 'polluted' by a Muslim shrine. Gershon Salomon, founder of the 'Temple Mount and Land of Israel Faithful Movement', is clear about his goal:

'Our vision is to move the mosque, move the Dome of the Rock, and have them built in Mecca. The mount must become again the centre of the Israeli nation' (quoted in Mairson, 1996:30).

In 1990, Salomon attempted to do just this. He led a group of his followers to the Mount to lay a cornerstone for the third temple. A crowd of about five thousand Muslims gathered to defend the site. Israeli soldiers sent to control the situation left at least seventeen dead and hundreds wounded. Yehuda Etzion, the leader of an underground Jewish movement, is quoted as saying that he hopes that the Muslim shrine and mosque will not have to be blown up. Nevertheless, he said: 'these buildings will have to go. That's clear. Their removal is the jewel in the crown in the process of Jewish redemption' (quoted in Landau, 1993:195).

Once the site is cleared and the temple built, the religious ceremonies will be conducted in the appropriate manner and by suitable personnel. The Temple Institute, a group of researchers and craftsmen dedicated to promoting the restoration, has already drawn up blueprints for the new building. Under the leadership of Rabbi Chaim Richman, an American Jew who came to Israel in 1982, students are taught the elaborate details of temple ritual. Sacred vessels, vestments and implements are being manufactured in readiness for the resumption of the daily sacrifice.

On the issues of land ownership and the rebuilding of the temple, many Christians, especially America's New Religious Right, join forces with Jews in what is theologically a most improbable alliance. The Zionist-Orthodox claim that the right of the Jews to the land rests on the authority of Scripture is supported by pre-millennial dispensationalists. These are Christians who believe that Christ will soon return to earth to inaugurate a new era, or dispensation, and reign for a thousand years. In Christian fundamentalist thought, the return of the Jews to Palestine is crucial, because it is a sure sign of the end of the world and of the second coming of the Messiah. Only when the Jews are back in their ancestral time and have converted to Christianity can the Messiah and his saints begin their thousand-year rule. The reoccupation of the land is one of the last pieces in the jigsaw.

Given this theological understanding, it is not surprising that the Jewish homecoming in 1948 was a cause of jubilation among fundamentalists. The prominent American televangelist, Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, claims that since the ascension of Jesus 'the most important date we should remember is May 14, 1948', because the formation of the state of Israel is 'the single greatest sign indicating the imminent return of Christ' (Boyer, 1992:189).

The Six Day War of 1967, when the Israelis captured the Old City of Jerusalem and occupied the West Bank, was of even greater significance. This was the beginning of the territorial expansion, promised in Genesis and Deuteronomy, which would end with modern Israel being twenty times larger than it was initially. The argument was incontrovertible, because the title-deeds of the enlarged state were in God's handwriting: the Bible was the mandate for expansion.

Though Christian fundamentalists disagree with the Zionist-Orthodox about the significance of a rebuilt temple, they enthusiastically support its restoration. They believe that the Temple Mount is where the world as we know it will end and the new age will begin. The restoration will force God's hand and kick-start the apocalypse. They also believe that together with the Jews they are doing God's will by fulfilling an ancient prophecy. They interpret Ezekiel's vision (in chapters 40-8) of a rebuilt temple as referring to the millennial temple. The programme is therefore in keeping with God's intention for the end-time. One of the most influential pre-millennialist authors, Hal Lindsey, highlights the issue thus:

There is only one place that this temple can be rebuilt, according to the law of Moses. This is upon Mount Moriah. It is there that two previous Temples were built ... There is one major problem barring the construction of a third Temple. That obstacle is ... the Dome of the Rock. This is believed to be built squarely in the middle of the old temple site. Obstacle or no obstacle, it is certain that the Temple will be rebuilt. Prophecy demands it, (Lindsay, 1977:45-6).

The fact that any attempt to take over one of Islam's principal sacred sites might unleash a third world war cuts no ice with pre-millennialists. The reconstruction of the temple must be regarded as an absolute necessity because 'prophecy demands it'.

The same appeal to prophecy was made when President Carter, in his concern for human rights, shocked American fundamentalists by using the words 'Palestinian homeland' in a speech about the Middle East in 1977. Shortly afterwards a full-page advertisement appeared in leading newspapers, signed by prominent evangelicals. Under the title 'Evangelicals' concern for Israel', the statement reads: 'The time has come for evangelicals to affirm their belief in biblical prophecy and Israel's divine right to the Holy Land' (*Christian Science Monitor*, 3 November 1977).

While every Christian has abandoned certain demands of the Torah, such as circumcision, kosher food and the death penalty for cursing one's parents, all of which express the revealed will of God as much as any other commandment,

many still justify the appropriation of Arab land by Israel on purely biblical grounds. The theology of dispossession carries the seal of divine approval. Ultimately, this standpoint, to use a phrase attributed to Hannah Arendt, engenders a 'God-like certainty which stops all discussion' (quoted by Ellis, 1997:7). Among Christians, as among Jews, drive to dispossess the Palestinians is based on an idiosyncratic interpretation of the Scriptures and is dictated by dogma.

Rehabilitating the Bible

The use of which Scripture has been put to endorse exploitation, genocide and the appropriation of land has important implications for biblical exegesis. Recognition of the damage done by narratives which legitimize violence in God's name poses a fundamental moral problem for those who accept such narratives at face value. It is difficult to reconcile a God who commands and gloats over the destruction of whole communities with a God of justice and compassion. The Bible loses respect as a guide for human life when the message found in parts of it is, to say the least, morally questionable.

The above examples of the reception history of specific passages demonstrate how readers in various periods of history interpret the Scriptures, and how perpetrators of violence are inspired by religious ideals. They are not interested in what the laws, stories and prophecies meant in their original context. They believe that the Bible is a divinely given guidebook containing subtle allusions to future events. They make no distinction in the text between the prescriptive and the inscriptive: the message is eternally relevant. What *they* say the Bible means becomes what it means. This inevitably raises the question: how is the Bible to be interpreted in a *way* which will negate its authority for those who use it to legitimize oppression? For the remainder of this essay we will note two ways of minimizing the damage done by an irresponsible and uncritical reading of Scripture.

Historical criticism

Until recent times, the traditional view of the biblical narratives was that they were genuine historical documents, the products of reliable historians, such as John Bright, which recorded actual events. Scholars who wrote histories of Israel and Judah considered that the Scriptures provided a firm factual foundation for their endeavours. Consequently, they produced volumes which were little more than a paraphrase of the biblical text. Those who regard the biblical account of Joshua's exploits as historically accurate accept the biblical claim that such drastic action was necessary in order to root out the pernicious influence of the pagan

population (Josh. 23:12-13). The renowned twentieth-century archaeologist Albright took this view:

From the impartial standpoint of a philosopher of history, it often seems necessary that a people of markedly inferior type should vanish before a people of superior potentialities, since there is a point beyond which racial mixture cannot go without disaster... Thus the Canaanites, with their orgiastic nature worship, their cult of fertility in the form of serpent symbols and sensuous nudity, and their gross mythology, were replaced by Israel, with its pastoral simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism, and its severe code of ethics (1957:280-1).

The Lord's own people must avoid contamination with any others. Drastic measures were needed to safeguard the future of the elect, and through them God's blessing to all humanity. The only possible course of action was the extermination of the Canaanites.

For some, this is a satisfactory explanation of the ethnic cleansing of Canaan, because it not only allows Joshua's account, with its frequent references to the 'abominations' of the Canaanites, to stand, but also exonerates the perpetrators. Genocide, terrible as it is, may be regarded as legitimate when undertaken to eliminate a greater evil. However, extra-biblical sources provide no evidence of unusual wickedness within Canaanite culture. In fact, a recent study paints a far more positive picture of life in Canaan than has been hitherto recognized. Closer scrutiny of ancient Near Eastern documents, coupled with a fresh assessment of the value of the Bible for historical analysis, has called into question 'the supposed difference between what may be termed genuine Israelite and genuine Canaanite society and culture' (Lemche, 1990:20).

But Albright's description of the Canaanites as immoral and sensuous, and his justification of their wholesale slaughter on grounds of inferiority, has further ramifications. Whitelam regards it as 'an outpouring of undisguised racism which is staggering ... It is a characterization which dehumanizes, allowing the extermination of native populations, as in the case of Native Americans' (1996:84). As we noted above, such a racist attitude is typical of the colonialist enterprise, which believed that the 'superior' peoples of the west had the right to expel and even exterminate indigenous populations (Mofokeng, 1988).

During the past three decades, biblical scholarship has questioned the reliability of Scripture as a historical record. The majority of commentators no longer accept that it contains a factually accurate portrayal of the past. They believe the biblical

narrative to be religiously motivated and to represent the ideology of a later age. They maintain that the Israelite redactors had political and didactic reasons for the way in which they represented the early period in their nation's history. They regard the literary nature of the biblical account of Israel's beginnings, as it appears in Genesis to Judges, to be folklore, epic or legend, rather than history.

Thompson (1974) and van Seters (1975) have vigorously challenged past efforts to establish the historicity of the patriarchs based on extra-biblical literature, arguing that they were fictional characters created by a much later age. According to Finkelstein and Silberman, archaeology does not support the biblical account that the invading Israelites ethnically cleansed Canaan in a matter of months (2001:105-22). Apart from the witness of Scripture, there is no evidence that a Hebrew conquest, as described in Joshua 1-12, ever took place. Gottwald has put forward persuasive arguments in favour of regarding the Israelite occupation of Canaan as a peasant revolt, rather than a massive onslaught by desert tribes under Joshua's leadership (1979). The origins of Israel were inside Canaan, not outside it. Cantor states the current position clearly:

Until the glorious day dawns of archaeological verification for the line of Abraham, we have to stipulate that all of Jewish history of the first millennium BCE and some of it for a century after that, as told in the Bible, is one of the great masterpieces of imaginative fiction or artfully contrived historical myths of all time. From empirical evidence, it did not happen (1995:5).

The view that the biblical narratives are inaccurate representation of ancient Israel, retrojections of a later period which are divorced from historical reality, have led to a heated debate about the authority of Scripture and about the relation of archaeology to the Bible, (Albright; 1957).

If the biblical texts are not straightforward descriptions of what actually happened, how they are they be understood? It is now commonly accepted by modern scholars that Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua to 2 Kings) were written several centuries later than the period of which they purport to tell. This view inevitably questions the value of the source as an accurate historical description of an earlier period. Deuteronomy is regarded as a seventh-century work, composed in the wake of the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 and linked to the reform of King Josiah (2 Kings 22-3). Critical investigation suggests that the book, or at least parts of it, was written to legitimate Josiah's attempts to reform the Jerusalem cultus and reassert a sense of identity among his subjects

after a century of oppression. Any practice that did not conform to Deuteronomic orthodoxy was condemned.

It may, therefore, be argued with some plausibility that the authors of Deuteronomy and Joshua were not recoding history. They were using the term 'Canaanites' to indicate those who opposed Josiah's reforms. Lori Rowlett points this out:

Although the Canaanites are the ostensible victims in Joshua, the goal is not to incite literal violence against a particular ethnic group. The text of Joshua is concerned with voluntary submission to a set of rules and norms; it is directed primarily at Josiah's own subjects, not at real (ethnic) outsiders, but at insiders who pose a threat to the hierarchy being asserted. The message is that the punishment of Otherness is death, and that insiders can easily become outsiders (Others) by failure to submit (1996:183).

Though, *prima facie*, Joshua tells the story of a foreign nation conquered by the early Israelites, the motive of the seventh-century author is to show dissenters within his own camp that the religious authorities will not tolerate disobedience. In doing so he resorts to the violent ideology of the Assyrian oppressors.

The recognition that the biblical authors fabricated Israel's past, for ideological reasons, should cancel out the use made of the Bible by oppressive regimes to legitimize the appropriation of land and the expulsion of its inhabitants. It should undo the damage which a literalist reading of the text has done. If the authors' intention was didactic, rather than factual, how can their words be used to support a standpoint which requires its justifying text to be historical? Michael Prior asks pointedly:

Do texts which belong to the genre of folkloric epic or legend, rather than of a history which describes what actually happened, confer legitimacy on the 'Israelite' possession of the land and on subsequent forms of colonialism which looked to the biblical paradigm, understood as factual history, for legitimization later? Does a judgement which is based on the premise that the genre of the justifying text is history in that sense not dissolve when it is realized that the text belongs to the genre of *myths of origin*, which are encountered in virtually every society, and which...were deployed in the service of particular ideologies? (1997:252)

Historical and literary investigations should invalidate the claims made by erroneous interpretations.

Ethical critique

The biblical critics of the nineteenth century placed great emphasis on the antiquarian setting of the text. They concentrated on trying to discover the meaning intended by the author at the time of writing. They studied Scripture in its original context and made an in-valuable contribution to its understanding, but they went no further. They did not recognize the challenge of the text for themselves, and therefore did not seek to discover its contemporary relevance in matters of faith. They asked what it *meant*, but not what it *means*. The impact of the bible, for good or ill, on personal and social morality was not on their agenda. They (critics) did not evaluate its message.

The past three decades have witnessed a very different approach to biblical study. The relevance of the critical enterprise for the believer has been questioned, and the discipline found to be wanting. In any study for the text, the role of the reader has now become significant, and has revolutionized our approach to Scripture. Members of any particular group or movement want to know how the Bible addresses their situation. They ask: How does Scripture apply to us where we are? How does the text address current issues? Does our understanding of the Bible lead to sociopolitical transformation? This is usually referred to as the 'reader-response' approach to Scripture.

When we study the reception history of the Bible, we see how its message has been read into the cultural context in which the readers find themselves. We discover how it has been interpreted in order to justify what in any civilized society is unjustifiable. This highlights the necessity to evaluate the text. Since divine approval of violence has clearly provided militants with dangerous encouragement, explanation or comment is not sufficient. Confronted with morally dubious passages which have been put to the kind of use noted above, we must apply an ethical critique. But, as David Clines points out, this is something that biblical scholars are loathe to do. They are eager to be called upon to explain and interpret the text, but they draw the line at evaluation. However, if it is to be regarded as an academic discipline, 'biblical studies has to be truly critical not just about lower-order questions like the authorship of the biblical books or the historicity of the biblical narratives, but critical about the Bible's contents, its theology, its ideology' (1997:25).

Commenting from the perspective of black South Africans, Mofokeng claims that 'the Bible itself is indeed a serious problem to people who want to be free', because

'there are texts, stories and traditions in the Bible which lend themselves to only oppressive interpretations and oppressive uses because of their inherent oppressive nature' (1988:38). In a discussion of Native American liberation theology, Warrior makes the same point. He insists that knowledge of the historical background, however illuminating it may be, does not alter the inferior status of the Canaanites in the biblical text and the theology which has developed from it:

The research of Old Testament scholars however much it provides an answer to the historical question – the contribution of the indigenous people of Canaan to the formation and emergence of Israel as a nation – does not resolve the narrative problem. People who read the narratives read them as they are, not as scholars and experts would *like* them to be read and interpreted. History is no longer with us. The narrative remains. (1997:280)

Read through the eyes of the Canaanites and their descendants – the marginalized in every age – the Bible is hardly 'the good news of God's love'. It is more likely to be regarded as 'an ideological instrument of colonization, oppression and exploitation' (Mofokeng, 1988:34).

Referring to the 'ethical consequences of the biblical text and its subsequent interpretations', Fiorenza, a leading feminist theologian, writes:

If scriptural texts have served – and still do – to support not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogyny, to justify the exploitation of slavery, and to promote colonial dehumanization, then biblical scholarship must take responsibility not only to interpret biblical texts in their historical contexts but also to evaluate the construction of their historical worlds and symbolic universes in terms of religious scale of values. If the Bible has become a classic of western culture ... then the responsibility of the biblical scholar cannot be restricted to giving 'the readers of our time clear access to the original intentions' of the biblical writers. It must also include the elucidation of the ethical consequences and political functions of biblical texts and their interpretations (1999:28).

Clearly, ethical critique, however necessary it may be, threatens to undermine the authority of Scripture. Appeal is made to the Bible because it is believed to reflect God's will. Those who regard the Bible as divinely inspired and inerrant will criticize the interpreters, rather than the text. In an essay in which he recognizes 'the dangers of Deuteronomy', Deist exonerates the biblical authors and blames the

commentators: 'Perhaps Deuteronomy *does* contain dangerous ideologies and therefore might very well *be* a dangerous book. But the greater danger lies in its (uncritical) *readers*' (1994:28-9). But the issue is more complex. It is not simply one of interpretation: it involves the actual words of Scripture. A xenophobic text will never be changed by interpretations of it. It will still speak clearly of slaughter.

Those who find it difficult to engage in an ethical critique of Scripture might find it helpful to recognize the different standpoints represented within the canon. Evaluation can be justified on an inner-biblical basis. The Bible itself contains 'a hermeneutic of suspicion'. In the words of Davies:

The biblical authors themselves frequently exercise a critical role, questioning past beliefs and querying past judgements. Far from accepting passively the values that they had inherited, their strategy was to probe, question, modify and even reject some of their inherited traditions...The Hebrew bible comes to us bearing clear traces of its own critique of tradition, and thus provides the contemporary reader with a warrant to dissent from its teachings and to question (and perhaps even reject) some of its ethical injunctions (2005:221).

It is not difficult to demonstrate the existence of conflicting opinions within Scripture. A balanced reading would probably cancel out all biblical claims, simply because each one has its opposite somewhere in the text. For example, the Torah states that Canaan belongs to the Israelites in perpetuity. But according to Jeremiah 7:15, the gift of land has been forfeited many times by Israel, on ethical grounds: 'Because you have done all these abominations, says the Lord, I shall fling you away out of my presence'. The xenophobic elements in the Torah are contradicted by the universalism of Ruth, Jonah and Isaiah. The divinely ordained onslaught on the Canaanites (Deut. 7:1-6) can be balanced with the command to love one's neighbour and to be concerned for the welfare of foreigners (Leviticus 19:18; Exodus 22:21).

The author of Job disagrees with the concept found in the book of Proverbs, namely that suffering or misfortune is an infallible index to a person's character. Some see in Amos's oracles against the nations (1:3-2:5) a trenchant critique of the horrors associated with war. The clash of opinion appears even within individual books. Mention has already been made of Deuteronomy, where the portrait of a militaristic and racist deity is balanced by that of God as a merciful and loving father. Confronted by these differing viewpoints, readers of Scripture may choose to question its teachings and become ethical critics in their own right.

The issue of the authority of the Bible in the context of ethics is addressed by Deidun in an essay which deserves careful attention. He believes that the problem of the relation between the Scriptures and Christian ethics is derived from a preoccupation with biblical authority, a preoccupation born of theological controversies embedded in past cultures. But this may not be the way forward now. Instead of referring to the authority of the Bible, Deidun suggests that we think of its 'potency' or 'fecundity'. He promotes an approach to the text which will be free and unpredictable ... versatile and imaginative ... It will be disdainful of biblical one-liners, and suspicious of 'favourite' texts or 'themes' ... Because it will want to take biblical writings seriously, it will not use them woodenly. It might on occasion put forward the opinion that the ethical insight of this is that biblical writer is wonderfully intuitive, while accepting with perfect equanimity that this or that other biblical writer's ethical stance is irrelevant or distasteful (1998:31).

We must take responsibility for the moral and political results of accepting without question the violent passages in Scripture and refusing to assess them. We must recognize not only the ideological distortions of certain passages in promoting violence and injustice, but also their very nature. We must accept that there is much in the Bible which is not worthy to serve as a model for imitation: it is not an infallible guide to complex ethical questions. In our attempt to handle our holy book responsibly, we might begin by considering how the actions of those who read the Bible without evaluating its message have affected their fellow human beings.

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