



What Is Wrong With the Old Testament? Some Reflections on War and Violence in the Hebrew Bible¹

Hans M. Barstad



Introduction

Clearly, even an inaugural lecturer in the Hebrew Bible cannot put the rich variety of documents that goes by the name of the Old Testament into one formula. Many have tried, of course. A very thick book; a difficult book; an inaccessible book; an alien book; an unread book; an unreadable book; an important book; a dangerous book; a misunderstood book, a misused book; an abused book; a holy book; a most unholy book. And we could go on, and on, and on ...

In spite of this, we know from religious, theological, cultural, social, political, and academic contexts how the Old Testament does constitute a set of truly extraordinary documents. Without the Hebrew Bible, there would have been no Judaism, no Christianity, and a very different Islam.

As the canon of Judaism and one part of the double canon of Christianity, the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is widely used in churches, synagogues, and private homes. It is likewise present in a multitude of hotel rooms worldwide. It is also a *literary* classic, widely known to students of literature and to general audiences universally. As the world leading bestseller, most bookshops would store at least one copy.

The historical and political relevance of the Hebrew Bible for present day society is overwhelming. No one can understand what goes on in the Middle East, for instance, without a fair knowledge of the legacy of ancient Israel.

From a historical point of view, however, the texts of the Hebrew Bible are *not* Jewish or Christian. Rather, they represent a selection

of what we might call the “national literature” of ancient Israel. We should never stop reminding ourselves that the Old Testament texts are *pre-* Jewish and *pre-* Christian.

It is, consequently, a common misunderstanding that the Early Church inherited the Jewish Bible as its canon. In reality, Christianity started life strictly as a wing within early Judaism. Later, both Christianity and Judaism grew, more or less simultaneously in the first centuries CE, out of the unique cultural inheritance of ancient Israel.

And yet, despite all of this, the Old Testament remains, basically, an unknown book.



God and the created world

If we sincerely want to try to find out what the Hebrew Bible is really all about, it is crucial that we take our starting point in the creation. The idea of God as creator constitutes the governing idea throughout the Old Testament, and its significance can hardly be overestimated.

Creation of man has received its classical formulation in the famous passage in Genesis 2:7 (all quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version): “... then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

However, equally important is the creation of the world as a good place to be. Gen 1:28–30: “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’”

It is typical of the Old Testament that God not only creates the world, but that he also sustains and maintains his creation. The classic expression *creatio continua* – “continuous creation” – is very apt for the Hebrew Bible. The whole lifespan of humans – from cradle to grave – is marked by and is dependant upon divine love and care. This notion appears throughout the Hebrew Bible, and in a large variety of different texts.

This implies that God, according to ancient Israelite views, stood behind *everything* that happened, including historical events. One cannot therefore at all set any boundary between creation in the beginning and the continuous keeping up of the created world throughout history and in contemporary life. God is here and now, and not in the hereafter. There is not much hereafter to speak of in the Hebrew Bible.

Awareness of the uninterrupted creation is richly attested in the Old Testament. We find a deep concern for humanity and the created world in many texts. A rich variety of images are used to give expression to the relationship between God and his creation.

Isaiah 66:10–13: “Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her – that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom. For thus says the LORD: I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

Or Psalm 103:13–14: “As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.”

Or Job 10:9–12: “Remember that you fashioned me like clay; and will you turn me to dust again? Did you not pour me out like milk

and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews. You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit.”



The good life – a part of the created world

Because of the *creatio continua* theology, the Old Testament favours a positive worldliness. As we know, this is unlike not a few later theological interpreters, and represents a sound corrective to some of the more legalistic and moralistic tendencies in subsequent reuses and reinterpretations of the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

The good life is represented by the simple enjoyment of life, family, and the produces of the soil. Behind this, we find the view that the world is God’s creation, and therefore a good place to be. Among many texts, a few illustrative passages may serve as examples.

Psalm 23:1–6: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.”

Or Psalm 128:2–3: “You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table.”

Or Psalm 104:14–15: “You [God] cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.”



Threats to the good life

Life, however, was as vulnerable in antiquity as it is today. The texts of the Hebrew Bible remind us, repeatedly, that all things human are perishable and transitory. In the same way as God has created human existence, the deity can also take life away.

Psalm 104:29: “When you [God] hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.”

Or Psalm 90:3–6: “You [God] turn us back to dust, and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’ For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.” (See also Psalm 144:4; Job 7:5–7; Job 14:1–2.)



War

However, the by far greatest menace to a peaceful daily life in ancient Israel was the recurrent wars. Israel and all of her neighbouring countries were engaged in war activities in one way or another for around 500 years (10th–6th centuries BCE). This is the reason why the Hebrew Bible is full of war language, war rhetoric, war poetry, war theology, war stories, laws concerning war, and war history.

War *is* terrible, but we cannot close our eyes and pretend that it does not exist. War has been a part of human existence for as long as we know, and it is with us today. We do not have to approve of this, but it is anachronistic and disrespectful to ignore the conditions of life that were prevalent in biblical times.

From the rich and varied material, I have chosen a poem from the prophet Joel. Similar to all the prophets, he is describing a contemporary situation. Joel 1:6–12: “For a nation has invaded my land, powerful and innumerable; its teeth are lions’ teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. It has laid waste my vines, and splintered my fig trees; it has

stripped off their bark and thrown it down; their branches have turned white. Lament like a virgin dressed in sackcloth for the husband of her youth. The grain-offering and the drink-offering are cut off from the house of the LORD. The priests mourn, the ministers of the LORD. The fields are devastated, the ground mourns; for the grain is destroyed, the wine dries up, the oil fails. Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vine-dressers, over the wheat and the barley; for the crops of the field are ruined. The vine withers, the fig tree droops. Pomegranate, palm, and apple – all the trees of the field are dried up; surely, joy withers away among the people.”



The God of Israel: a brutal warrior?

Among the most difficult texts to accept for many today are the several texts that describe Israel’s God as a bloody and brutal warlord. Examples, among many, are: Isaiah 34:1–3: “Draw near, O nations, to hear; O peoples, give heed! Let the earth hear, and all that fills it; the world, and all that comes from it. For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hordes; he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood.”

Or Psalm 68:22–25: “The Lord said, ‘I will bring them back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths of the sea, so that you may bathe your feet in blood, so that the tongues of your dogs may have their share from the foe.’”

Or Isaiah 49:26: “I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Saviour, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”

It represents a misinterpretation to understand these, and the many similar texts, as supporting war and war activities as such. Again, we have to understand the relationship between war and religion in antiquity. Since God was behind everything and could decide the

course of history, including what went on in the battlefield, the deity would necessarily have to play an important role in the war activities themselves. In addition, it is a well-known phenomenon, observable also today, that the need for the presence of and rescue by God is felt even stronger in times of crisis. In antiquity, the most common disasters would consist of epidemic mass infections, drought, famine, crop failure, war.

In times of disasters, the God of Israel was asked to support his followers. Descriptions of divine support obviously had to use the language of the day. If we look closer at these texts, we shall see that they are simply describing what actually went on during the battle. References to the stench of corpses and to dogs licking the blood of the enemy are well known experiences in the life of the soldier. The same goes for the eating of own flesh. We are reminded of this when we read Lamentations 4:9–10: “Happier were those pierced by the sword than those pierced by hunger, whose life drains away, deprived of the produce of the field. The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food in the destruction of my people.”

War is brutal, but it is, sadly, part of human existence. We cannot simply close our eyes and pretend that these terrible things do not exist.



Holy War

Since God is always involved, we may refer to war in ancient Israel as a kind of “Holy War”. Unfortunately, this has become a much misused and often misunderstood term. The whole idea of “Holy War” needs demystification as something that does not only belong to distant times or strange cultures. When wars are fought, also in our times, soldiers and their families pray in battlefields and in homes, as well as in various places of worship, “against foreign nations”.

We could say that the function of much of the war poetry of the Hebrew Bible is similar to what we may find in “Prayers and Thanksgivings, Upon Several Occasions: In the Time of War and Tumults” in *The*

Book of Common Prayer: “O Almighty God, King of all kings, and Governor of all things, whose power no creature is able to resist, to whom it belongeth justly to punish sinners, and to be merciful to those that truly repent; Save and deliver us, we humbly beseech thee, from the hands of our enemies; abate their pride, assuage their malice, and confound their devices; that we, being armed with thy defence, may be preserved evermore from all perils, to glorify thee, who art the only giver of all victory; through the merits of thy only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Or in “A Prayer in time of war” in *The Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland*: “God of infinite mercy, we trust in your good purposes of peace for all your children. We pray for those who at this time face danger in the defence of justice. Watch over those in peril; support those who are anxious for loved ones; gather into your eternal purpose those who will die. Remove from the hearts of all people the passions that keep alive the spirit of war, and in your goodness restore peace among us; for the sake of the Prince of peace, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”



Rape and incest

Among several texts in the Hebrew Bible, that many find unacceptable today, or even offensive or oppressive, are stories dealing with sexualized violence.

One such text is the story of Tamar and Amnon in 2 Samuel 13, dealing with incest and rape in the royal family. The storyteller utterly condemns the action. This happens first through the victim Tamar, whose heartbreaking words we may read in 2 Samuel 13:12: “She answered him, ‘No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile!’”

However, we cannot understand fully the richness of this narrative unless we read all of it very carefully. When we take a closer look at the text, we find that it is remarkably “up-to-date”, providing us with

painful insights into life itself. We can like this or not, but, again, we cannot close our eyes and pretend that this is not so. In the text, we find a detailed and realistic account of an incestuous rape and its horrible consequences. The narrative contains also the first known psychological description of male sexuality.

Women abused by relatives and friends! From the text in the Hebrew Bible, we understand that these terrible crimes of violence against women, committed by men, have followed the human race for thousands of years. This happens every day and concerns millions of girls and women worldwide, including Edinburgh. Through this text, the unmentionable can become mentionable, and victims of sexual exploitation may learn that they are not alone.

This is also an important text for all men. Through the text men should be able to understand at least some of the pain and despair brought upon women through brutalized sexualized violence, mostly committed by men. I hope that many will also fight against it.



Stoning to death

Ancient Israelite society sentenced its inhabitants to death by stoning. Most of the inhabitants of Western Europe would regard this as an unnecessary and brutal form of punishment. We should not forget, though, that this negative attitude to capital punishment is quite modern, and, as we know, execution is still in use in many societies today.

It is difficult to understand why certain actions, some of which appear to be rather innocent today, are punished with death by stoning. The laws are found in Lev 18-20, but also elsewhere. Same sex relationships are banned (Lev 18:22), and punished with death (Lev 20:13). The same goes for a whole series of sexual activities. At the same time, it is said that everyone who curses his father or mother shall be put to death (Lev 20:9).

It is important to realize, however, that we cannot use the laws of the Old Testament in order to find out what the normal practice for capital punishment was. It is not likely that it was widespread at all.

It should be recalled that moral rules are found very frequently also outside of the legal corpuses of the Old Testament. The following example from Malachi 3:5 shows this clearly: “Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.”

Legal corpuses have their own logic, and laws have to be interpreted before they are applied. This is as valid today as it was 2000 years ago. Due to the vagueness of the language used in legal rules, and due to the defeasibility of the rules themselves, scholars have discussed the logic and nature of the application of legal rules in general. Insights from this research imply that we have to be particularly careful in this area.

We cannot really explain these laws, but we can make some guesses why they were made. Life expectancy was extremely short indeed, and the life of children frail. Because of the complex land inheritance and family structures, everything centred on the regulation of offspring.

Among the most problematic texts also today are those dealing with gender issues and sexuality. These areas represent some of the most essential parts of what it is like to be a human being. They concern our very own life situations, vulnerabilities and identities.

Due to the role and status of the Bible, it is not wrong to use these texts as a starting point for discussing ethical problems of today. What is wrong with much of the modern debate, however, is that many participants take legal rules out of their context, and misunderstand the purpose of the texts.

We should realize that all of these rules form a part of a coherent “purity” system meant to protect a pre-industrial agrarian tribal society, and provide good life for the people living there.

Many would agree that sexuality and procreation should benefit our lives. However, we have to realize that in the Western pluralist society in which we live conditions are radically different from ancient Israel.

For this reason, quite a few of the moral and ethical discussions of today have generated more heat than necessary. Unfortunately, there is also a darker side to it. Occasionally, we experience that the Bible is misused for exploiting and oppressing fellow humans.

Clearly, such a misuse of the Bible goes strongly against the “good life ethos” referred to above. Based on the view that creation represents the most basic idea of the Old Testament, we could say that to marginalize or oppress someone for his or her sexuality or gender is an attack upon creation itself.

Altogether, the story of how the Hebrew Bible came into being is the story of how earlier versions of ideologies, theologies, and laws were reused and reinterpreted for later generations. One of the better-known examples is the reinterpretation of the Deuteronomistic History by the Chronicler, with its radical new King David ideology. Therefore, it is quite “unbiblical” to claim that the canon represents eternal truths the way some do. Canonization is a process. Since we are dealing with texts, meanings are not inherent. Each new generation must read and understand the Bible in a manner proper and adequate to its own society.



Throwing the first stone

That the Hebrew Bible is not a dead corpus of meaningless texts that should be obeyed mechanically and for their own sake was shown also by a Jewish rabbi by the name of Jesus. Jesus undertook one of the more radical interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. His reinterpretation

led to the creation of a completely new religion. The principles that he used, however, formed a part of contemporary Judaism, and were not invented by Jesus.

It is sometimes assumed that Jesus revolutionized our ethical system through his radical reinterpretation of the Mosaic laws. Well known is John 8:3–7, referring to Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22: “The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?’ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’”

Jesus, however, is just another rabbi who utilizes Jewish Tannaitic interpretations criticizing the unfair treatment of woman by men and their laws. The rabbis, too, realized that texts needed to be understood differently from generation to generation.



Towards a conclusion

The interpretation process that started already during the formation of the Bible has continued ever since. The generation of today represents the latest version of an interpreting community that has lasted for 2500 years.

The texts of the Hebrew Bible, with their completely different values and mentalities, may at first glance give an alien impression. However, when read carefully, and with insight, it turns out that these texts are important not only for churches and for universities, but that they have a message to every one of us.

What strikes us above all when we read the Old Testament is the relevancy of the texts for present-day life situations. In the stories

about the struggle for a better life, human relations, war and violence, each new generation can recognize some basic experiences, identify some relevant ideas, or discover some problems of everyday life.

Quite a few of the texts of the Hebrew Bible *are* cruel. The reason for this is that the people who created them lived in the real world. Similar to what we do today. In real life, there is the good life, but there is also suffering. We cannot pretend that there is no Middle East, no Rwanda, or no Kosovo.

The Hebrew Bible is a book about life itself, and about what it is like to be a human being. We should reflect upon these texts, learn from them, argue from them, and we may become wiser. *Tolle lege!*

¹ This paper was originally delivered as Professor Barstad's Inaugural Lecture for the Chair of Hebrew and Old Testament in the University of Edinburgh on 14th September 2006.