

Mar 29, 2003

Holy Words and the Ethics of Reading: A Call for Faithful Contextualization

Carole R. Fontaine
John Taylor Professor of Biblical History and Theology
Andover Newton Theological School

Standard Feminist Statement of Disclosure

It is common among my branch of Biblical Studies that commentators 'come clean' about their 'social location' and personal expectations or biases, since feminist biblical hermeneutics rightly notes that no one is 'objective' and that such specific, personal elements figure strongly in our subconscious desires to create and collate meanings in the text and of the text. I am a 52 year old white woman who has been married to the same man for over thirty years; I am not a mother. Though white, I was raised in close contact with poverty and especially the oppression in the African American, Jewish and Caribbean communities of the South I remember from my youth. Everything I know about being human I learned from observing black domestic workers and Jewish business women. They have taught me well.

Today, I am employed in a 'free-standing' (no associated university) protestant seminary whose fiscal lifeblood is the support of individual churches and founding denominations. My students do not want to hear 'bad' things about the Bible, any part of it. Their churches do not want them to preach on such topics, and their ordination papers do not regularly feature their skills in critiquing the biblical text, though our seminary doggedly teaches the methods. My denomination, however, one of choice and not birth, is the Unitarian Universalist Association, the last wing of the Radical Protestant Reformation.

Not as well known as we would like to be outside of New England and Transylvania, we are the group of Yankees who 'just said 'No'' during the founding of this country under Puritan theological traditions that re-inscribed many of the old problems of Northern Europe onto an already inhabited 'new' world. We hold ourselves to the ethical bar of the worth and dignity of every person, as well as that of an interdependent ecosystem; we regard reason as a guide in the journey of faith, and submit ourselves to the chaos of democratic polity in a denomination characterized by our refusal to agree on much of anything.⁴

This is all to say that in my own faith context no one doubts the legitimacy of feminist interpretation, historical studies of the Bible, or raising questions about the implementation of ancient moralities in a modern world of religious pluralism. The remarks I make here will be about the Christian appropriation of the Hebrew Bible as part of its Scripture, but many of my points are applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to Judaism and Islam, the two other religions of the Book. Though Christianity, Judaism and Islam may all differ in their understandings of the inspiration and authority of scripture, Western Protestant Christianity has been particularly involved in researching these questions and their meaning for modern interpretation, and so may offer some resources or metaphors for those in other traditions. At the very least, in interfaith dialogue, though we may never agree, we should at least be willing to learn from others' mistakes.

The basic point of this paper is that, regardless of a tradition's view of the origin, inspiration and authority of their sacred text, that text was inevitably received into the hands of fallible human interpreters, who stamped their own concerns on their interpretation of that sacred

⁴Our doggerel on this topic: 'I think that I will never see/A UU who agrees with me.'

text. When we then note that those fallible interpreters were usually all of one sex, of one social group—elites with sufficient education and leisure to produce secondary interpretations, and at least in the beginning, all from one part of the world, we must take those limitations seriously. The Christian message may well look different in Africa than it does in Rome; we cannot let only one set of interpreters masquerade as the possessors of *all* meaning for the faithful. (ahadith)

Out of the Past: Reading as a Member of a Professional Guild

Because of the political changes afflicting early modern Europe, whose theological revolution was named the 'Protestant Reformation' of the 16th century, the study of the Bible in protestant circles was anchored in an attempt to be faithful to the original languages of the text in translation, reception and reproduction. This basic norm of 'sola scriptura', 'by Scripture alone', empowered the Word of God in the Bible to leave the hands of the elites who guarded ecclesial traditions and move into the embrace of those we now call 'Ordinary Readers'---those without the original languages, but with a hunger to know the original meanings in order to better live by them—if a person in a faith community---or critique them—if secular. This dynamic meant that faithful translation of holy words was one of the MOST critical roles a religious leader might undertake. Ordinary Readers were invited to read for themselves, but with an expert always metaphorically at hand to shape the interpretation based on special knowledge.

But beyond the special knowledge of the original languages so appropriate to the Protestant recovery of the Bible, another branch of Biblical Studies sprang up eventually: the historical critical method, begun in the West in the 18th century, refined in Germany in the 19th century, and given breath of life once more in the 20th and 21st century with the new treasures made visible by archaeology and linguistics. This approach to the Bible attempts to ask

questions of authorship, social setting of author and audience, as well as those of historical truth. If the God of the Bible does indeed act in material history, and not only in the mind of the believer, then scholars reasoned that it was perfectly acceptable—even necessary—to look for evidence of those actions. To do this, one had to discover the background of the text and let that knowledge inform both search for truth and subsequent interpretation. As I recently heard the former Dean of Harvard Divinity School and Bishop of Sweden Krister Stendahl, the esteemed NT scholar so dedicated to interfaith dialogue, remark, ‘The Devil is in the Details, but God is in the Interpretation.’ Well said! For, fellow peacemakers, we have a checkered story to tell of the Christian churches’ interpretation of Scripture: if we seek to know and serve a God of Compassion and Justice, then why has the Bible so often been able to be used as a tool of oppression in our hands? Whether it is the good Dutchmen of the East India Company engaged in the slave-trade, or the conservatives of the American South who believe that the inferiority of those with brown skin is indelibly inscribed in the Bible, whether it is the expansionist policies of 19th century USA which saw itself as the new Chosen, divinely ordained to drive out Native Americans just as Joshua drove the Canaanites out of their land, or the Vatican which refuses to credit women with real souls and roles in the Church, ones that go beyond serving the interests of its male elites, the Bible has been a mixed blessing to those who are not part of the dominant society which interprets it. For the past three centuries of Christian interpretation in the West, biblical scholars---those very people best equipped to talk about the text’s formation and meaning in ancient context---have been viewed by some branches of the faithful as the true Enemy. So I talk with you today as an example of the Enemy Within, the one who would make peace despite what the Book of Joshua in the Hebrew Bible may say, and one who claims that

God is NOT behind the stories of violence and exclusion that serve modern political leaders so very well in marshalling public opinion. Currently, our Christian conservatives in this country have a handy slogan to help them decide all things: 'What would Jesus do?' they ask themselves repeatedly, and think they can KNOW reliably, without study, without depth, without an openness to the possibility that they and their tradition could be wrong. Many of us who are active in trying to bring reasoned values to the political and personal debates about ethics are now rephrasing that question and causing some dismay: 'Who would Jesus bomb?' we ask. And just like our opponents, we think we know the answer to that one: no one, not ever. Frankly, I cannot imagine what Bible the current unelected officials of the US Administration are reading; certainly not the Bible that sustained black slaves or women of faith through the centuries, but I am happy to be able to tell you that the broadest coalition against our current government's attempt to initiate a preemptive strike against a country presenting no imminent threat is one that is based in faith: all our religious communities have come together, regardless of their beliefs about Scripture, to say NO to an unjust war.

The historical critical method had its own touchstone for faithful interpretation: we sought always to uncover the original intent of the author—ah, we were taught to be *so* confident that we could know that and proclaim it objectively! You will note that in this scholarly method, there is very little role of the current audience in determining meaning; they are there simply to be passive receivers of the 'true' (=historically determined) meanings. However, in order to bring the Bible's content into creative tension with daily life, one must move from the original meaning in the past to the interpreted meaning in the present. To do this, we adopted the method of 'dynamic analogy': we sought to find a similar social setting in the modern world that

'matches' or is at least moderately congruent with the original context and intent of the author, and take a flying 'leap of faith' from 'then' to 'now.' By insisting on congruence in social settings, we were able to teach students to critique rich white churches with prophetic texts, and support struggling minority communities with messianic or Exodus-oriented traditions.¹¹ So far, so good, but this set of principles left open several very important questions, including that of Authority---why are we even *reading* Scripture with the expectation that we will find answers---or at least better questions---there?

Authority is a relational value: one person or thing only has authority as compared to something else which is believed to have *less* authority. (For example, it is the actual New Testament which matters and has authority, *not* the Bush Administration's interpretation of it, though it is our task to show how the one is betrayed by the other.) In early Christian theology---pre-critical interpretation, as we would name it now---the Authority of Scripture was based primarily in its origin: dictated or at least directly inspired by God, the Bible had authority because, if that was indeed its origin, then it had to be True: really, explicitly, faithfully TRUE. As critical biblical scholars, however, we must admit that with the advent of science, many of the Bible's statements cannot be literally true, so must be some other kind of 'true': theologically, ethically, culturally or what-not. Hence, we have chosen to understand the relational value of Scripture's authority in other ways: the Bible could be Scripture because of its unique content (the revelation of God as Christ in Jesus of Nazareth), or because of its transforming function of

¹¹Two standard statements on these theological developments can be found in Krister Stendahl's 'Biblical Theology, Contemporary', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), pp. 418-32, and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), especially pp. 144-59.

creating believing communities out of a mixed multitude of cultures and ethnicities. We are trapped in a paradox, then, if we add those early Biblical authors into the mixture: although it is quite true that Scripture *creates* communities, it is also true that *communities* have created Scripture. And all too often, those communities were motivated by their own socio-economic needs and existential crises, such that the interpreters were only too eager to cast God in their own image and identify themselves alone as God's chosen and protected.

However, the naiveté of all these positions became increasingly transparent to some critics. Not only were we less sanguine that we could know the past objectively or that there was only *one* past to be known, the readings inscribed within the text itself were becoming problems in and of themselves for the very reasons just mentioned.¹² Many Third World and Western feminist interpreters began to agree that there was no *one* pristine reading of a text which pointed us in the direction of an unproblematic code of morality. The polyvalence of the text was a blessing to the dis-satisfied interpreter, but a curse to churches and denominations looking for those Ten Words that would always and everywhere be correct when applied faithfully to the world of the believer. Critical awareness of competing readings only egged on competing

¹²See, for example, I. J. Mosala, 'The Use of the Bible in Black Theology', in I. J. Mosala and B. Tlhaagale (eds.), *The Unquestionable Right to be Free: Black Theology from South Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), pp. 175-99; R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). Of course our critical suspicion is itself historically situated! Who could possibly proclaim the same old theologies by the light of the fire of the Holocaust? It would be much easier to trust the critiques of those who tell us to 'suspect the hermeneutics of suspicion' if they were not all elite academic males mourning the loss of their own primacy, and who seldom seem to subject their own methods to the same ideological criticism they demand of others! For defense of the purported objectivity of the Maximalists (those who use archeology and historical criticism to defend the Bible's historicity), see James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 14ff. One must presume that feminist critique of method and challenge of the text figure in no part of Maximalist analyses because the concerns they raise cannot be answered successfully.

readers, and the stakes were high: are women or homosexuals really *people* (suitable for ordaining), not failed males or moral deviants? Why do we follow only the *sexual* regulations of the Hebrew Bible (not that they are all *that* explicit and straightforward!) while simultaneously ignoring the Bible's fairly clear witness on the topic of wealth and poverty??! Slavery, roundly reported and supported everywhere in the Bible, is judged by critics to be a 'cultural' contaminant from the time and place of the biblical authors. Why is slavery discarded by theologians as a betrayal of the Gospel when patriarchal hierarchy and androcentrism are *not*? The lack of logical coherence in the application of the Bible to the world of believers was exacerbated by the purported postmodern position of 'anything goes'! The conservative White Supremacist reading is as welcome, theoretically, as the reading of the Bible for peace and liberation. Was there really any way to decide between them?

Are All Readings Created Equal?

But all readings are *not* equal. Some are uninformed, un-contextualized, selective, or downright manipulative. We may have taught ourselves to look suspiciously upon coherence as some winning editor's attempt to silence divergent opinions buried below the surface of the text, but we have had nothing to put in its place. There are many voices in our Bible, from different times, places and contexts, often contradicting one another. In current interpretations of textual meaning, it sometimes seems that there are more 'gaps' in the text (empty spaces in which some critics abjure us to insert ourselves midrashically) than stable pathways. In fact, we are searching for a 'meta-hermeneutic' to guide us from grammar-and-lexicon in the Church to city hall and Congress. It behooves interpreters to make clear how and why they interpret as they do, and to keep a rigorous eye on one's own interpretive biases and outcomes. On what grounds does one

say *No!* to white supremacist readings of the text that casts the white race as God's eternal chosen, while saying *Yes!* to a feminist or other liberationist readings which are aimed at deconstructing the whole parcel of dualistic and ideologically tainted ideas that suggest the Really Real¹⁴ that God of Compassion and Justice, loves some and not others?¹⁵

Many theologians throughout history have recognized the need to be able to 'update'¹⁶ the text if it is to be applied fruitfully to their times and communities.¹⁷ One method was based on using an appeal to 'tradition' to determine a group's 'canon-within-a-canon;' other options included adding 'reason' and/or a theology of ongoing revelation to the mix. But do such approaches *really* do the trick? Leaving out the 'bad' and difficult parts of the Bible in favor of the love-and-peace passages is not really an option, since those texts still operate to sanction violence in our world. Further, 'reason' is as captive to socialization as the translators, teaching us *not* to see what needs to remain hidden for ideological purposes. Likewise, the so-called 'tradition' to which one might appeal for help is by no means inclusive or any less culturally captive than the biblical text itself. Christian war-mongers have their own traditions of reading

¹⁴The 'Really Real' is my feminist modification of Rudolf Otto's 'Wholly Other' found in his *The Idea of the Holy* (trans. J. H. Harvey; London: Oxford University Press, 1923). I do not object to the concept of radical transcendence as an ontological component of the Really Real, but if that Source is considered 'entirely other' and alien, then humanity cannot be made in its image (nor should it try to be), nor have any human capacity of apprehending the Wholly Other. While this may be a problem caused by the difficulties of language and metaphor, I suspect there is much hierarchical, patriarchal bias in most theories of radical transcendence since such formulations usually assign all value and ontic validity to things 'outside' the experienced world. For a straightforward critique of the epistemological difficulties on this topic, see William E. Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

¹⁵This critique reflects a classically 'Universalist' position.

¹⁶Or 'discard'?

¹⁷Clearly, the NT's 'Call no man Father' (Matt 23.9) was *never* a big hit within some

the texts to which they can appeal and feel justified, as does the male-exclusive Roman Catholic hierarchy in its failure to address the realities of human sexuality. So, faith, reason, tradition, revelation provide no *sure* measure—these will vary, because they are human constructs and humans are situated within a matrix of shifting values, authorities and experience. No wonder New Testament critic Daniel Patte argues so forcefully for the adoption of ‘androcritical multidimensional exegesis,’ similar in nature to what is offered below.¹⁸

A Faith-Based Initiative: An Intertextual Hermeneutic

For Christians, perhaps the most successful meta-hermeneutic for the church has been the appeal to the Gospel and the person of Jesus of Nazareth whose story is narrated there. Certainly, the story of a Palestinian Jew, a sage-healer-prophet-exorcist, going up against Imperial Rome with nothing but the Hebrew Bible and some great parables in his hand thrills us in the same way the tale of David toppling Goliath with some smooth stones does. Expect the unexpected, the content of the Gospels counsels us; look for God on the margins, and redraw the circle so that the despised Other (‘sinners,’ ‘gentiles,’ tax collectors) are within its boundaries of humanity. The ignominious death as a convicted criminal proclaimed as some kind of a *victory*? Well, *that’s* unexpected, all right! But does it leave some of us wondering if the Osama bin Laden s of the world merit a bit more theological analysis than an angry government and its public are prepared to grant? If we construct the Bible as an overall story of the plucky underdogs whom God protects, nourishes, and grants unexpected circumstances, then are we willing to

hierarchies.

¹⁸*Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (1995).

city-states, the hard-hearted Pharaoh, or the Roman Empire? Can believers in the rich nations of the world see themselves as Job, a wealthy man suddenly encountering the underside of his society, when they would be so much more comfortable thinking of themselves as Suffering Servants carrying the White Man's Burden? We must de-colonize our own methods, identities and interests before we can ever expect to do justice to either the Bible or society.

Aside from the persistent problem of 'who's who' in mapping the Gospels onto the modern world, we have a few other kinks in using the Jesus of the Gospels as our measuring rod for all truth. First, are we so *very* sure Jesus said this or that? Certainties are just as scarce in the study of the New Testament as they are in the world of the Hebrew Bible. Next, there are things upon which Jesus is never said to have pronounced a final position at all: *in vitro* fertilization, the ordination of women, homosexuality, and cloning are topics which immediately spring to this interpreter's mind. Finally, there are things that *are* attributed to Jesus or found in the New Testament writers that are worthy of critical dispute and whose ethics must be addressed. It's no fair making Jesus into a feminist, if the point of contrast is based on Christian constructions of alleged Jewish misogyny and legalism!²⁰ Slavery, again, comes to mind: *should* slaves obey their masters?²¹ Should the Passion Narratives *ever* be read liturgically without some gesture toward the legacy of anti-Judaism they created and perpetuate, yea, even unto the death of Jewish communities throughout the Christian world in medieval and modern times? Should Christian

²⁰Katharina von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), pp. 57-90.

²¹Not where I come from! Yes, I know this statement does *not* occur in the gospels, but the obvious failure of Jesus to critique slavery gives rise to the same counter-liberatory dynamic as does the outright command to accept one's servitude. Even though I do not presume that the NT is a full and adequate report of Jesus' speech and activities, the fact that its composition was apparently guided by theological concerns means that the lack of a critique of slavery is still a problem for me.

guilt over the fate of the Jews at our hands mean that we are welcome to ignore the legitimate claims of the Palestinian people? I think not!

Toward Multidimensional Interpretation

Embracing the Gaps.

Perhaps the meanings of our meanings are to be found in the *struggle* to create and live by them, as well as in the *content* of those meanings which we choose. If we remember that the Sacred, as known through the Bible, is a dynamic Presence which is often marked by an absence—no idol in the Holy of Holies!²²—perhaps we may learn to take our gaps in certainty *as* pathways in and of themselves, a well traveled approach to understanding which the Bible itself endorses. The text reminds us there are other pathways to understanding than the ones a broken world forces upon us; we go through in the empty space of Un-knowing that the Redeemer creates. In this gap, we discover that God is with us in our journey to something more whole-some. The Gospel of John—the most mythological and theological of the four NT gospels—has a wonderful statement in it: “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). I have always thought that this saying was directed toward the future, to modern believers who would be confronted by archeological and genetic evidence, to scientific discussions and the persistent effects of Christian Scripture badly interpreted, bringing woe instead of wisdom to the world it came to save.

Let me give you an example of a reading that stands firmly in modern times, with all our methods and discoveries, yet tries to attend to the real issues of the text in the past and again in

²²This is very different from the ancient Egyptian view: there is no greater insult to a god than to proclaim “Your shrine is empty!” (“The Contendings of Horus and Seth”, in Simpson, W. K. (ed.), *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions and Poetry*, new ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 112.

the Bible, embedded they were in violent conflict over resources and ideologies, could not bring themselves to say 'no' to such destruction of life, that does not mean that the Children of the Book must follow in the path of their sins. If we are, what answer shall we give when the Redeemer who proclaimed 'Blessed are the peacemakers!' questions us? King Mesha was willing to slay thousands, up to and including his own child, to win his wars; the question now is, 'Are we going to do the same?'

Post-script

It becomes evident from picking up a newspaper that both sides in the current conflict are willing and able to sacrifice their first-born sons in pursuit of honor and victory. We see how these theologies play out on the television screen nightly. What does the Bible's view of war as 'holy' sacrifice or needed decontamination say to us now?

It tells us to hope, to search, to remember our common humanity and to deflect, wherever we can, a view of male honor which is built upon the ability to inflict injury on others. Can there be another kind of male power, another image of strength? Yes—it is there in the Law already! The firstborn offered as a human sacrifice was refused by God as a tragic human mis-reading of divine intention. The child to be sacrificed is to be redeemed, through a money offering, specified by Law. This regulation teaches us that whatever may have been thought 'right' in the past must be held accountable the standards of Law and later interpretation. This killing today in our world is not necessary; neither is it holy. The Law offers us other ways to resolve such conflicts and invites us to craft male honor anew, with an eye to ending of vengeance for shame and dishonor.

the future. As a feminist critic, I readily admit that parts of the text are both ugly in the original and devastating in later, real-world application.³¹ But if, in my understanding of authority and inspiration, our texts have possessed us and expressed us, then even what is ugly and evil in them can be considered useful when employed critically in the service of justice. We *need* to question war, slavery, and sexual oppressions and our constructions of reality: *all* people do, anywhere and in every time, and the appearance of these miserable things in our Scripture invites (even begs) for us to consider them in the light of God's Compassionate nature. The text invites us to make the ugly beautiful, transforming and redeeming it in the real world of experience by making us see what we would prefer to leave in shadow. This is very useful indeed, as I shall demonstrate on the subject of 'Holy War' or herem, in the Hebrew Bible.

Transformational, Generative Content. I find the Bible's thematic 'plot,' if you will, to be one of transformation and generation. The text speaks of a Presence whose presence transforms the life of the world, and generates a new way of being.³⁴ Interpretations should strive to do the same. If the outcome of meaning-making is nothing more than reinforcement of the status quo, or self-congratulation, we would do well to be suspicious of our desires for such readings. Who or what are we trying to exclude, and how shall we transform our blindness into sight? Whether one says 'Exodus' or 'Resurrection,' the story is one of possible *change* and growth of something new in the wake of that transformation.

War, holy or otherwise, is a time-honored activity of the human race, it would seem. My

³¹Carole R. Fontaine, "Many Devices" (Qoheleth 7.23-8.1): Qoheleth, Misogyny and the *Malleus Maleficarum*, in A. Brenner and C. Fontaine (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom and Psalms* (FCB, 2nd series, 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 137-68.

³⁴I also endorse a theology which understands that the life of the world equally transforms the Presence, at least in the ways It makes Itself known to the world.

historical study in preparation for this talk suggests that war in ancient times was engaged in primarily by men, thus evening the survival rate in subsistence societies where women routinely die in childbirth. Next whatever the aggressor's rhetoric might claim, war is about possession of economic resources. Everywhere throughout the Bronze Age in the ancient Near East, we see evidence of the violent destruction of cultures, peoples, and land, all occurring long before the Hebrews of the Bible ever came on the scene. Very often the impetus for war is the need to respond to environmental or social constraints: too big a population means that the carrying capacity of their territory will eventually need to be supplemented with new lands; populations movements in response to drought or famine will produce conflict when the migrants face indigenous populations, who in turn are trying to secure their own survival. Finally, war requires an ideology, a set of ideas, to ease the guilt of the fighters about the fate of the dead and captive. Male honor is validated and encouraged by war-making; peacemaking is 'unmanly' and counter-cultural, and if the Bronze Age gave any thought to women's role in this whole endeavor—which it didn't—it was probably that women were the providers of the raw material for war: their own bodies for victimization by opposing armies, and the bodies women create which are needed to be warriors, enemies, captives, and the dead. Men make war; women mourn.

Materialist critics will point to the fact that the scourge of the Ban, or Herem, or as we might now say, jihad, may in fact be a response to the social constraints on a society during war. On the one hand, the taking of an excessive number of captives—esp. males—in war places a burden on the society to provide a place and role for them. Mostly this ends in the charming practice of enslavement, but in many situations, it was simply NOT feasible to spare the lives of those captured in war, so wholesale extermination of the population might be considered

necessary by the war-makers. On the other hand, the conditions of war-making in the ancient world—surrounding a city and wearing it down through famine, pestilence, and horror—often created public health disasters: epidemics of typhus, plague, or other diseases. The following contagion was thought to be a danger to the war-makers—and often it was indeed a danger: that's how the Hittites of Asia Minor caught plague from Egyptian captives. Such contagion could only be dealt with through torching the whole population and settlement, killing all organic life, but keeping as booty 'whatever may pass through the fire'.

Now these readings in my view, while having some descriptive sociological merit, attempt to normalize the Herem/holy war by means of our old faithful fallback explanation of 'historical necessity'—always pronounced over a text by hind-sight, and seldom taking up the ethical questions of the actions. Even worse, these materialist readings which excuse Holy War in the HB ignore the inconsistencies in the texts themselves! In some cases, when the besieged city is far away, one may take the virgin women as captives along with other booty, but all the males are exterminated. In cases where the 'foreign' (=indigenous) city is in the very land the biblical heroes are trying to take for their own, the whole population is exterminated, lest they teach the chosen ones to worship different gods—but the cattle is spared. In still some other cases, everything organic is exterminated, and even those metals associated with the worship of other gods are totally destroyed. Now obviously, if sometimes the virgins and cattle are left alive to be taken as spoils, then the impulse behind extermination of the males cannot be a public health measure, nor solely a desire to spare the burdens brought by increasing one's population size. No. They advise killing the men, especially the ones nearby who just might fight to keep their land, because the men are Trouble. Men have been programmed by their honor-and-shame

culture to take war 'personally'. They fight back when attacked; when enslaved they are shamed and angry, and try to run away; when their sons are allowed to live, they seek revenge against the conqueror. There is no materialist reading to make the ideological and social construct of violent conquest and its correlate of Holy War 'go away', even if the faithful wanted it to (and usually they don't, since they style themselves as the god-fearing, faithful conquerors). But it is also important to note that it is NOT the activity of war that is viewed as 'holy', set apart or dedicated to God, but rather the 'outcome' which is 'holy'—a human sacrifice offered to or commanded by God.

I deal with this situation in two ways, one method drawn from within the text; the other from outside the text. Within the text, I call upon that choir of conflicted voices to have their say: if war is so all-fired holy, as Deuteronomy and Joshua would have us believe, then why do we find texts which suggest that it creates uncleanness? Yes, extermination creates corpses, a source of pervading contamination and uncleanness, but surely God would make an exception and counter this if the war was really Holy, 'clean', and the life taken is given as a desired and acceptable sacrifice demanded by God! There is, in those ritual statements about impurity created by Holy War, a profound recognition that when human life is taken, a breach in normal reality is created, a severing gash that is not easily mended. There is a deep uncertainty about the wisdom of killing, however much other texts may try to make those actions routine.

The two theologies of Holy War in the HB address the guilt of the killers in different ways, always with the goal of easing their burden of ambivalence. One theology of war is found in the priestly sources which view death in battle or its aftermath as a sort of human sacrifice offered to God in obtaining help in winning the war or made as a vow of thanks afterward. In

this theology, the human killed is *the* most valuable thing one can offer to a deity, and may tally nicely with the hints we have that child sacrifice of the first born may not have been an uncommon practice in biblical Israel and Judah. It is in these contexts that it becomes acceptable to keep other booty, since the very best portion—the humans—have been offered to God. In this thinking, the sacrificed human is not dehumanized, according to scholar Susan Niditch, but rather affirmed as clearly human and valuable, just as the winners are.

The Deuteronomic writings take a different perspective: for them, the practice of Holy War is a necessary and deserved punishment of the sinner, foreigner, enemy, and a religious duty of the highest order as it is the only safeguard against the contaminating presence of the Other. Here, the sacrificed humans are *not* really human, but a source of contagion, monsters who commit abominations that God justly commands to be punished, lest they taint the chosen. There is no view that the slain ones might have been innocent. Under these circumstances, taking other booty is less likely to find approval, and it is important to note that this kind of Holy War ideology *also* permits purging one's own group of those who have fallen away from its strict regulations: a sort of honor killing en masse, of which God totally approves. The fact that we have two conflicting ideologies of what the Holy War actually means and does is a sure sign that a conflict of interpretation existed around the event. Though modern people may reject either ideology (and no doubt *should*), they must attend to the fact that the Hebrew Bible is not of one mind on this topic! Surely that biblical ambivalence should guard against the wholesale exercise of extermination of a people on biblical grounds.

In my next move in interpreting biblical Holy War traditions from within the text, I juxtapose the regulations and creedal statements about the morality and necessity of something

like 'holy war', according to either ideology, with all those places in the text where the Other has become a blessing to the self-styled 'chosen.' Who says that the Book of Joshua should outweigh the books of Ruth and Esther in shaping our understanding of what to do with that troubling Other in our midst? Where would the male babies of the enslaved Israelites have been without the compassionate, boundary-crossing assistance of the Egyptian women in fighting back against their leader's plan for wholesale extermination? What would have happened to the Jews if Esther had not married *outside* her group and become consort of the Persian ruler hell-bent on destroying her people at the urging of a scheming courtier? This textual strategy demonstrates that even those things clearly and unanimously proclaimed as patently 'true' didn't seem quite so certain for the original communities from which the texts emerged, nor for later faithful interpreters.³⁵

Outside of the text, I turn to archaeology to demonstrate, as it so admirably does, that Holy War was not a concept unique to ancient Israel, but in fact a standard cultural practice of many of the peoples of that region and time. From the 9th century BCE, we have a text known variously as the Moabite Stone or the Mesha Inscription, found in modern Dhiban in Jordan. In it, King Mesha of Moab tells us that his land had been suffering at the hands of the Israelites because their god Chemosh had been angry with them. Then Chemosh told the king to go seize the town of Nebo from Israel, and Mesha reports:

"So I went by night and fought against ittaking it and slaying all, seven thousand men,

³⁵Hosea's reinterpretation of the incident in the valley of Jezreel, believed by the authors/editors of the Book of Kings to have been commanded by God, is a biblical example of reinterpretation *within* the text.

³⁶ Translation by W. F. Albright, in James Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd ed., Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 321.

boys, women, girls and maid-servants, for I had *devoted* them to destruction for (the god) Ashtar-Chemosh."³⁶

The word used in the inscription for 'devoted for destruction' is the same root as the Hebrew word *herem*, Holy War, and in fact, it sounds as though the whole inscription could have been lifted out of the Hebrew Bible, so close is the world view and ideology of extermination as a sacrifice for victory in war!¹ As it turns out, Mesha is thoroughly enmeshed in the horror of this strategy for military victory; in 2 Kings 3:26-27 we read of Mesha's encounter with the kings of Israel and Judah:

"When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through, opposite the king of Edom; but they could not. Then he took his eldest son who was to reign in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall. And there came great dread upon Israel; and they withdrew from him and returned to their own land."

In this non-Israelite king, we see, as if in a mirror, all the horrors of killing that the Bible seems to support, but *now* the Holy War and the child sacrifice to win a war are done by a foreigner for a foreign god whom the Bible soundly rejects. *And it works!* Hence, this human behavior must be labeled for what it is, a shared cultural product, human and not divine; unjust and not a desired sacrifice demanded by a god of compassion. If this command to destroy is not unique to the biblical God who alone is Sovereign of the universe, then how can we make it a centerpiece of our dealings with others, the ultimate answer to conflict resolution? Even though the authors of

¹ cf. Num 21:2-3, and the so-called 'Theology of History' in Joshua and Judges.