

FACTFILE: GCE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

THE NATURE OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT



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God as Character: In all of the interesting stories in the Old Testament, peopled by a vast array of different characters, it has been noted in recent years, principally by literary critics, that the central character is God. Unlike the God of the philosophers, the God of the Bible is portrayed as like a person, with personality traits. This theme begins to explore the nature of God in the Old Testament through the idea of a creedal statement that summarizes the core activities/qualities of God. The purpose is to: deepen awareness and understanding of aspects of the divine in their literary-theological contexts; evaluate positive and negative characteristics of God; and assess how these contribute to an enriched understanding of God and Old Testament theology.

A Deuteronomic Creedal Statement: Gerhard von Rad, one of the most influential theological interpreters of the Old Testament in the twentieth century, proposed that the fully expanded narrative traditions of the Bible began as short confessional credos that were then regularly modified, expanded and reiterated in new circumstances in subsequent generations until the final version was arrived at. For von Rad Deuteronomy 26:5–9, along with Deuteronomy 6:20–24 and Joshua 24:1–13, constitute Israel's earliest and most characteristic creedal statements. These recitals, situated in contexts of worship and instruction, tell of Israel's remembered "historical" experience: they primarily tell of the decisive ways God has intervened and acted in the life of Israel. Thus from the outset, von Rad understands Israel's theology as a narrative rendering of what has happened in Israel's past: a narrative that still has defining power for succeeding generations.

The substance of the creedal statement in Deuteronomy 26:5–9 consists of three primary memories: first comes a brief allusion to the ancestors ("My father was a wandering Aramean..." in v.5, and "the god of our fathers" in v.7), who appear in Genesis 12–36; but the central events are the liberation from Egyptian slavery and the entry into the Promised Land. In this way, Israel's confessional life is situated between "going out" of Egypt and "coming in" to the land of promise. Both events are rooted in the character of God, understood as sovereign and faithfully involved in the life of Israel.

From this core credo, which for von Rad acts as the seed of Israel's faith, two developments bring that faith to full expression. Firstly, this brief recital was filled out, not only in greater detail, but also with other themes: the creation materials of Genesis 1–11; all of the ancestral materials of Genesis 12–50; the belated inclusion of the Sinai material, which was thought to have had an independent development. These additional traditions and stories, when all in place, provided the outline for what became Genesis to Joshua, known as the Hexateuch. This greatly enlarged credo provides the story-line for Israel's faith, stretching from the promise of the land (Gen. 12:1–3) to the completed settlement in the land (Josh. 21:43–45). In this way, Israel's faith moves in a great arc from promise to fulfilment.

Secondly, the recital itself, as reflected in Deuteronomy 26:5–9, occurs in an act of worship: thus, the recital is a liturgical act, in the same sort of way the recital of a creed today is. In the ongoing life of Israel, however, the recital was increasingly taken out of the context of worship and became simply

an epic recital, in which Israel asserted its place in the world against other peoples and its reason for being in the world. Von Rad's understanding of Old Testament theology is that it is an ongoing traditioning process in which each subsequent generation retells the narrative recital, but retells it incorporating new materials and recasting it so that the ancient recital may be kept pertinent to new times. The completed form of the tradition is then the accumulation of many retellings of Israel's core memory: while much that is new is introduced, the core material is constant. Von Rad conceived these credos as bottom-line articulations of what was unquestioned and non-negotiable in Israel's faith.

An Alternative Creedal Statement: During the course of an act of divine self-revelation, found in Exodus 34:6–7, God uses a series of adjectives to describe God's character: these essentially form a creedal statement encapsulating Israel's understanding of God. In context, this self-declaration of God comes at a crucial moment in Israel's developing relationship with God: a crisis has been evoked by the ill-conceived golden calf made by Aaron, to which God responds in destructive rage (Exod. 32:10). In 32:11–14 and 33:12–16 Moses intercedes with God on behalf of Israel, insisting that God must accompany Israel into the wilderness if Israel is to survive. In response, God assures Moses that God is gracious and will act graciously. In an escalation of the bargaining with God, Moses asks to see God's glory (33:18), but God refuses the request, offering instead to show Moses "his back" (33:23). Then God passes before Moses (34:6), making an announcement about the character of God (34:6–7), out of which comes God's resolve to continue the life of Israel by means of a new covenant arrangement (34:10). Thus, in the immediate setting, vv.6–7 are a self-revelation on the part of God, which provides the basis for the continued relationship with Israel, after the unparalleled affront to God in the golden calf.

Scholars believe that Exodus 34:6–7 is an exceedingly important, stylized characterization of God: a formulation so carefully composed that it may be considered as something of a classic, normative statement to which Israel regularly returned. It thus merits the label *credo*: a *credo* of adjectives. These adjectives, to which Israel makes repeated and recurring reference, are of two kinds. First, in 34:6–7a, the adjectives are positive and God is characterized by an important cluster of terms. Thus, God is:

Compassionate—The most important exposition of this word in Hebrew is by Phyllis Trible, who has shown that etymologically it is intimately connected to the Hebrew for "womb," which shares the same root: thus a God who is compassionate has a quality something like mother love.

Gracious—The term is most often used to suggest that God acts without need for compensation or hope of benefit, but freely and generously; the name Hannah is derived from the Hebrew for "gracious."

Slow to anger—The Hebrew literally means "of long nostrils," perhaps suggesting that God's long nose allows divine rage and anger to cool off before they threaten Israel (note God's propensity to "burn hot" against Israel, as in Exodus 32:10, 11).

Steadfast love—This term indicates tenacious fidelity in a relationship, a readiness and resolve to continue to be loyal to those to whom one is bound; in this recital of adjectives about God, this is the only one used twice, suggesting its particular importance.

Faithfulness—The term bespeaks complete trustworthiness and reliability; it is closely related to the Hebrew for true/truth; the words "steadfast love" and "faithful" become a characteristic and much-used word pair in the Old Testament, together marking God as utterly reliable and trustworthy.

This accumulation of positive adjectives concerning God culminates in the surprising and rarely used word meaning *forgive*. The final positive statement uses Israel's full vocabulary for sin, "iniquity, transgression and sin," indicating that God will keep safe from destruction those with whom God is bound in covenant.

It is possible to do extensive detailed work on each of these terms, but what should be emphasized in this instance is their cumulative effect, which stresses God's intense solidarity with and commitment to Israel: God's life with Israel is marked by a fundamental, inalienable loyalty. Israel's life, at this pivotal point of risk in Exodus 34, is now guaranteed by the assertion on the very lips of God that God lives for Israel in complete fidelity, even among those who enact "iniquity, transgression and sin."

Given the substance of this important characterization of God, the second half of the stylized formula in verse 7b is surprising and ominous. It insists that God will not “acquit” but will instead “visit iniquity.” This negative intrusion surprises because it indicates that God takes affront (as in the case of Aaron in Exodus 32) very seriously; so seriously, indeed, as to affect the relationship for as many as four generations. It is especially interesting that it is “iniquity” that is visited on subsequent generations, since it is the very same iniquity that is pardoned in verse 7a, along with transgression and sin. There is tension in the character of God, which perhaps alerts Israel to the reality that God’s full character is not subsumed under the divine commitment to a relationship of solidarity with Israel. There is something in God’s sovereign rule, in the way God takes God’s own self seriously, that is not compromised, even in the practice of solidarity. The positive cluster of terms in Exodus 34:6–7 offers a full characterization of the One to whom Israel owes its allegiance and on whom it trusts for its life. The negative warning of the second half of the formula may indicate how demanding the allegiance due to God can be, and it makes clear how risky Israel’s trust in God will be: neither the allegiance owed to God, nor the trust placed in God is easy or one dimensional.

Tracing the Creedal Statement: The credo concerning God in Exodus 34:6–7 is taken up in many different contexts in Israel’s subsequent testimony. So, when Israel spoke about God, this formulation recurred in many different settings and circumstances. These include:

Hymns of Praise – Israel uses the positive recital about God when it wants to speak *about* God as the One whom Israel knows to be utterly reliable and who makes life possible for Israel. In Psalm 145:8 Israel takes up the rhetoric of Exodus 34:6 and doxologically proclaims that the fidelity of God that characterizes God’s relation to Israel is now available for all of creation. This usage celebrates God’s goodness and generosity, makes an unqualified affirmation of exuberant trust, and begins to extend the positive qualities of God’s character not only to Israel but to all creation (Psa. 145:9).

Psalms of Lament – Israel also uses the positive recital about God when it wants to speak *to* God as the One who is expected to be gracious and faithful. So in Psalm 86 the speaker is under threat and appeals to God for rescue, using the adjectives of Exodus 34:6–7 to motivate God to help (Psa. 86:5, 15). In essence, the creedal formula is used

to remind God of who God is, as declared by God in Exodus 34:6–7. The purpose of the prayer is to motivate God to be true to God’s self, and so overcome the present situation of danger by a powerful show of solidarity. The prayer proceeds as if the Exodus credo is an agreed upon baseline that is mutually accepted by God and Israel, but from which God has departed and to which God now needs urgently to return. The speaker does not doubt that God is “merciful and gracious”: that is who God really is, and it is to this sense of God’s true self that the psalmist appeals.

Arguing with God – Perhaps the most interesting and intriguing use of Exodus 34:6–7 occurs in Numbers 14. God is completely provoked by Israel, which endlessly complains about its treatment by God. As a result, God’s patience with Israel is exhausted. In weariness, God confides to Moses that God would simply like to destroy Israel and start over with only Moses (v.12). Moses argues God out of this declared destructive intent, deploying two strategies to persuade God not to act in rage. Firstly, Moses appeals to God’s pride, indicating that God will be shamed and diminished in the eyes of the Egyptians and the inhabitants of the land if God is not able to bring Israel into the land as God promised (vv.13–16). Secondly, Moses argues that instead of destroying recalcitrant Israel, God should forgive (vv.17–19). Note that the basis for this daring appeal is a direct and complete recital of Exodus 34:6–7: Moses quotes right back at God what God has said concerning God’s self-commitment to Israel, which God now proposes to disregard. Moses thus argues that God should act in accordance with God’s professed commitment. God’s response to Moses in verse 20 indicates that God has been persuaded by being urged back to this baseline of the relationship. It is equally evident in verse 21 however, that God takes into account the second half of Exodus 34:6–7, for God will indeed destroy the disobedient in Israel. Thus Moses skilfully appeals to the creedal statement of Exodus 34, but God also remembers the formulation and appeals to the part of it that Moses chose not to draw attention to: God and Moses both show great agility in their deployment of the credo.

Warning Israel – In the prophetic tradition, Joel plays on the positive aspects of Exodus 34:6–7, but is very aware that it could be the negative that become operative. In Joel 2:12–14, the prophetic voice looks for signs of repentance from Israel and encourages a return to God because God’s character is defined by the positive qualities of the credo. But the questioning tone of verse 14 indicates that

a positive response on the part of the divine is by no means guaranteed: on account of the degree of disobedience and depth of recalcitrance in Israel, it may be the negative that comes into play.

Running from God— It is the positive side of the Exodus 34 creedal statement that dominates Israel's theological thinking. The use of the formula in the tale of Jonah, however, shows that on occasion, God's characteristic "steadfast love and faithfulness" can become problematic for Israel: in this instance, Jonah's conviction that the credo is true causes him to run from God when he is called to preach repentance to hated Nineveh because in Jonah's view there is a strong possibility that God will act compassionately and graciously towards the foreign city; and Jonah does not want this for a bitter enemy. Indeed, when Nineveh responds positively to the message of repentance, Jonah cites the creedal statement as the reason for his initial flight to Tarshish (Jonah 4:2). God is thus confirmed as steadfast and gracious: even to those outside Israel; even to Israel's sworn enemies. This is theologically challenging to Jonah, who wishes God were otherwise and in this case had enacted the second part of the Exodus 34:6–7 recital.

God's self-disclosure in Exodus 34:6–7 evokes in Israel profound trust, telling argument, and confrontational resistance: Israel not only treasures this characterization of God and relies heavily on it, but also engages keenly with God about it. The engagement is often that God is not fully who God is said to be; occasionally it is that God is as said but that Israel wished it were not so. Either way, the character of God is a reference in Israel to be counted on and contended with. It is important to notice that this classic recital in Exodus 34:6–7 is not claimed by Israel, within the text of the Bible, to be central and normative. That claim is made by scholars, based on characteristic usage across the sweep of scripture: thus the credo represents how Israel found it valid to speak about God in a recurring way. It should also be noted that the creedal statement does not articulate all that can and should be said about God: but it does constitute an immensely important core statement concerning the character of God.

Hosea and the Struggle at the Heart of God:

In considering the nature of God, Hosea offers a fascinating perspective. In Hosea 11, God is pictured in a tender, loving parental relationship with Israel: God teaches Ephraim to walk (v.3), leading him "with cords of human kindness" (v.4). But like an errant child when it is able to walk by itself, the child runs away, and the more the parent calls, the further

the child runs (v.2). The reference is to the Exodus (vv.1, 4) and Israel's subsequent waywardness (v.2) but it is expressed in intensely familial imagery. This reaches its climax when God, poignantly imagined as a conflicted, distraught, troubled parent wonders how he can give up on his prodigal child (v.8a). Significantly, God muses if the divine can treat Ephraim/Israel like Admah and Zeboim: cognates for Sodom and Gomorrah; God is therefore contemplating Israel's utter obliteration (v.8b). At this point, the struggle within the heart of God begins to find resolution as God says "My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused" (v.8). This is a deeply charged, powerfully resonant statement: note that the word translated "changed" can also be translated as "overthrown," as in an earthquake. It is the term used to describe the "overthrow" of Sodom and Gomorrah by earthquake (Gen. 19:21, 25, 29): God had considered overthrowing Israel like Sodom and Gomorrah, but it is God who is overthrown. A seismic shift has taken place in the heart of God. The outworking of this radical change is revealed when God says, "I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor devastate Ephraim again" (v.9). The basis for this is that God is God and not subject to human ways: God is able to renounce violence and as difficult as such a renunciation is, stick to it. In Hosea 11:1–9 we are given access to God's internal life, in which God reaches new self-awareness, beyond God's rage against Israel. After God has vented against Israel (vv.5–7), in a moment of reflection God makes a new resolve, "not to come in wrath" (v.9). This poetic passage may be taken as a singularly important step in God disentangling the divine self from being enmeshed in a propensity to violence.

Widows, Orphans, Aliens: One way in which the character of God finds expression in the Old Testament is in God's ethical concern for the weak and vulnerable; this ethic consequently also becomes the concern of Israel as God's people. Among this class of marginalized people, widows came to be grouped with orphans and aliens as among the most vulnerable in society. In a society organized according to patriarchal power (and, it may be noted, a text reflective of that social organization), widows, orphans and alien sojourners characteristically had no social entitlements of their own. Women and outsiders were dependent on male patrons to protect them and represent their interests in a male-ordered, male-dominated society.

As a person who had lost her husband, a widow had also lost her protector and provider, and was thus placed in a very vulnerable position. She was dependent on the support and protection of people who had no legal obligation to provide either

protection or support. Israel is characteristically enjoined in the Torah/Law commandments to care for the widow (and orphan and alien sojourner); the purpose is to provide protection and maintenance to a member of or residing in the community (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17–21; 26:12; 27:19; see also Isa. 1:17, 23; Jer. 7:6). These commands, rooted in the intention of God, anticipate and enable a social practice in which the resources and energies of the strong are committed to the well-being of the weak, marginalized and socially isolated. In this way, a network of welfare maintenance is implied and engendered. Behind the recurring and insistent ethical provision is the assertion of Israel that God—as the supreme male protector—is committed to the well-being of the widow (see Psa. 68:5–6; 146:9; also Deut. 10:18). Note thus that the social requirement commanded in Israel is linked to and grounded in a theological claim. The practical outcome is that the social community of covenant is imagined and structured, not on a competitive basis, but as a neighbourly network that sustains people who cannot sustain themselves; the result is a clear restraint on a society driven and governed by the idea of competition among males.

It is surely positive that widows' needs register as of importance; Deuteronomy 25:5–10 includes how the primary need for a home can be achieved by the practical provision of a safe place for a widow in the family of her deceased husband. But notice that even this provision and the protection it brings is shaped to conform to the reality of a male-oriented society. This said, the Old Testament offers a range of narratives about widows who act boldly and thereby implicitly challenge male hegemony: these include the stories of Tamar (Gen. 38), Ruth (the book of Ruth), the widow of Zarephath (1st Kgs. 17: 8–24), and the Shunammite woman (2nd Kgs. 8:1–6). In each case, the narrative concerns an act of courage and self-assertion that results in an astonishing turnaround: an element in the stories is thus women finding their voice for self-assertion.

The care and protection of widows and orphans exhibits how Israel deals with the realities of social relationships and transposes those realities into theological reflection that stays clearly connected to social reality. The outcome is an understanding that God is a key player in social relationships, who protects the unprotected and commands that same protection within the community. For the most part, widows are understood in social contexts that stay, without objection, within the arena of male domination; but to a significant degree, God

acts differently and emerges as a protector of vulnerable, at risk women.

Turning specifically to the term “alien” note that it can be translated “sojourner,” “refugee,” “immigrant,” or “resident alien.” In the early history of ancient Israel it may have been that a sojourner was any other desert dweller that was encountered: in these situations hospitality was a cultural expectation and ethical requirement (see Gen. 18:1–16). This understanding, however, tends towards the romantic and it should be stressed that the category of “alien sojourner” substantially reflected people displaced because of economic, political, or military disruption. Such people sought life in a new place where they did not belong because they were no longer welcome or could no longer sustain themselves in their old place. In the new place, they may or may not have been welcome, but they were clearly outsiders who constituted an otherness in society that was regularly perceived as an unwelcome threat. The long-term biblical context no doubt had its share of political, economic, and military upheavals that produced resident aliens: people seeking a new life in a new social setting. In circumstances like this, which are firmly on the horizon of the Old Testament, the following three aspects are important:

1. Israel's memory and self-consciousness hold that its own past was that of an alien sojourner, with all the precariousness implied by such a condition. Abraham is cast in such a role, seeking food in Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20), and the arrival of Jacob and his family in Egypt indicates a vulnerable life in an alien environment (Gen. 46:1–47:13). Alongside the Genesis ancestors, the period leading up to and including slavery in Egypt is understood as a sojourn in a strange land where life is endlessly at risk (see Deut. 10:19; 15:15; 23:7). The complicated historical question of being a Hebrew is pertinent to the status of early Israel, for the Hebrews appear to be a group perpetually marginal to an ordered political economy.
2. Israel's recital of faith centres on the conviction that God rescued Israel as a community of at-risk slaves and fugitives, giving a homeland to people who were otherwise aliens and outsiders in a land not their own. While the reception of the “land of promise” is complex and problematic, in general terms God is understood as causing Israel to have a new place of well-being, no longer in the alien or outsider role.

3. Torah/Law commands Israel to welcome the resident sojourner in a hospitable way and to care for the outsider who has no stake in the host society or resources (see Deut. 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17–21; 26:11–13; 27:19). In these provisions, the sojourner is usually linked to widows and orphans, comprising the most vulnerable categories in society. Thus the Torah/Law provides towards resident sojourners a practice of generosity and hospitality that is rooted in God's own inclination towards needy outsiders.

In its testimony about sojourners, Israel is able to hold together (a) the character of God (b) its own historical memory and (c) the ethical practice that the God of all alien sojourners mandates; for note, even though Israel came to be settled in its own land, a strand of thought in ancient Israel continued to recall that even Israelites were welcomed outsiders in God's household. As God observes, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev. 25:23). Similarly, the psalmist prays, "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien, like all my forbears" (Psa. 39:12). Israel's capacity to welcome the "other" is an important dimension of biblical ethics, as well as part of a lively trajectory of interpretation that expands to include other types of "otherness" (see Isa. 56:3–8). It might well be argued that the Torah/Law mandate concerning resident aliens is a remarkable one in the face of historic (and on-going) resistance to the other, which seems to be an enduring human inclination.

A Warrior God: In addition to the compassionate aspects of God's character, the Bible, a document saturated in violence, also presents God as a violent warrior, who is deeply enmeshed in violence. Close to the core of Israel's theological claims, God is conceived of as a "warrior" (Exod. 15:3). It might be argued that without that dimension of divine nature, no exodus would have taken place and no ensuing story of Israel's faith. As presented in the Bible, some of Israel's wars are at God's behest, but in some others, God's own person is said to be at the centre of the combat. In such rhetoric Israel participates in a common mythological pattern across the region but adapts it to its particular covenantal claims. Thus God is portrayed as a ready, able warrior, whose hand is not "shortened" (Isa. 50:2; 59:1), but who has the power to bring about change in assertive and violent ways. The idea of God as a warrior—expressed most regularly

in the phrase "Lord of Hosts"—becomes a carrier of important theological claims for Israel:

1. God as warrior is a function of God's sovereignty over the nations. Any sovereign must have the capacity to enforce governance: states regularly seek a "monopoly of violence" that is embodied in a police force or army. In Israel's rhetoric, God will not be mocked, nor will God's governance be mocked. God will instead act against those who belittle or trivialize God's rule (see 1st Sam. 17:16).
2. God as warrior works as the special protector, defended and liberator of Israel, so that the image of warrior is a dimension of Israel's chosen-ness as God's elect people. So, in Exodus 14:13–14, God's military intervention against the Egyptian armies is on behalf of Israel. The outcome of the struggle with Pharaoh indicates, according to Israel's testimony that God is more than capable against every military challenge, and against every rival deity who stands with and for Israel's political enemies.
3. On occasion, the warrior God who protects Israel and enforces sovereignty also acts as a warrior against Israel to inflict injury and punishment upon Israel when recalcitrant (see Jer. 21:4–5). Thus the imagery of God as warrior is a supple metaphor that can serve in a variety of ways to make the particular theological claims that Israel asserts for its God. The key interpretive problem is to adjudicate between the concrete reality of war and warrior, and the metaphorical use made of the imagery that is no longer closely tied to that concreteness: the problem is that any use of the imagery in a metaphorical way is never completely free from the concreteness of violence to which the imagery belongs.

As part of the background to the notion of God as a warrior, it may be noted that war is a commonly assumed political strategy that pervades the Old Testament. The act of war may be understood as a branch of policy, but its practice in the ancient world—as in the contemporary world—is steeped in violence and brutality that are regularly excused for reasons of state. Israel was a socio-political community that had to make its way in the real world of super-power rivalry, often at risk and under threat, often surrounded and threatened by enemies stronger than it was. Israel was regularly engaged in forming alliances, building coalitions and engaging in combat. What is striking about such reports is how ordinary and unexceptional war was regarded as being: war in one form or another

was clearly a constant, available strategy about which Israel had no special qualms.

In recent years, it is noticeable that there has been a tendency to transform the God of the Bible into a gentler agent: martial imagery has been purged from hymns, as in “Onward Christian Soldiers”; and in denominations that use lectionary readings the “hard parts” have been skipped over. But theological interpreters cannot easily escape the rich metaphorical field of war and warrior, even while acknowledging the acute problem in this rhetoric of violence, brutality, and patriarchy. Indeed, imagery of violence seems endemic even in Old Testament visions of peace:

- Isaiah 9:6 envisions the coming of a “prince of peace”; but what is not often noticed in the immediately preceding verses is that the “peace” the new king will bring will not be due to reconciliation but to a complete routing of the enemy (see Isa. 9:4–5).
- Psalm 46:10 is often taken as assurance inviting calm and serenity; but the preceding verse affirms that the confidence in God expressed in verse 10 is based on a violent seizure and destruction of enemy weapons, only made possible by immense force (see Psa. 46:8–9).
- Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3 present a famous vision of disarmament that anticipates a new era of peace; but note how precisely the same imagery is used in completely the opposite way by the prophet Joel—instead of “swords into ploughshares” and “spears into pruning hooks,” Joel urges “ploughshares into swords” and “pruning hooks into spears,” with the weakling saying, “I am a warrior” (see Joel 3:9–10).

These texts are cited not to defend the motif of war with its inescapable violence, nor to undermine the deep hope of peace also expressed in them. Instead, the texts are pointed out to illustrate how difficult the issue is: there is no easy answer; the complexity of the text invites and requires a profound process of reflection.

The Conquest of the Land: There is no question more troubling for theological interpretation of the Old Testament than the undercurrent of violence that exists in a considerable part of the text. There is perhaps no portion of the textual tradition that is more permeated with violence than the conquest traditions of Joshua. The promise and anticipation of land, rooted in God’s resolved generosity towards

Israel, came to fruition in less than glorious ways for the account of the entry into and conquest of the land in the book of Joshua are saturated with violence. The land that God promises and gives is also taken by Israel in a vigorous onslaught. The violence that entails burning the cities and killing their inhabitants, moreover, is sanctioned and authorized by the God of the promises, so that God’s own life and character are embedded in narratives of violence.

In effect, the land is subjugated by means of brutal military attack that is characteristic of any military operation, and is congruent with the practices of the ancient Near East: then, as now, war is hell; there is no warrant for pretending otherwise about war, ancient or contemporary, for war depends upon ruthless aggressiveness that unleashes brutal assaults on the environment (though see Deut. 20:19–20 for an interesting command against ecological vandalism associated with war) and the population, especially the vulnerable population of women and children, who are often categorized as “collateral damage.” In composition, the book of Joshua takes various tales of violence and incorporates them into the wider narrative of conquest. These include the narratives pertaining to Jericho (chapters 2, 6), Ai (chapter 8), various kings (10:16–43), and Hazor (chapter 11). Together they picture a military onslaught by Israel that eventuates in the extermination of its enemies.

At one level these narratives of violence can be explained as exercises in ideology: without any critical awareness or afterthought, Israel recounts nationalistically in a self-justifying way what it believed it had the right to do to secure land for itself. This interpretation goes a long way in understanding these texts but it does not adequately deal with the issue that the violence is not simply undertaken on a human initiative: it is also understood as a divine mandate as the effective means of keeping God’s promise of land; nor does it address the ethics of an existing population being violently displaced and denied its (rightful?) place in the land. It is possible to argue that the ideology is so virulent and self-satisfied that it draws God into the claim of violence: effectually, God is used to justify the violence. Even so, in the final form of the text it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that God is left as the definitive source of justified violence: justified because the violence is enacted on behalf of God’s people. So if we take the texts with some theological realism, we are bound to say that God is here implicated in the violence, and perhaps that God’s violence is rooted in a violent propensity in God’s own character.

This is deeply problematic, to say the least, but any other reading does not incorporate all the data and therefore ends up, to a greater or lesser degree, as a cover up concerning the disclosure of God given in these narratives. Notice also that the tradition of violence has a long, powerful, unforgiving memory as expressed in Israel's relationship to the Amalekites (traced through Exod. 17:8–18; Deut. 25:17–19; and 1st Sam. 15). Further, notice that the God of Israel, seen as the one who is capable of violence against Israel's enemies, eventually is capable of violence against Israel itself in later contexts. It may be argued that in the Christian tradition (anticipated in texts like Hosea 11:8-9), the death of Jesus is a way in which God takes that violence into God's self, but as suggestive and helpful as this is, the raw data remains: divinely inspired and instigated violence is deeply etched in the text, and this amounts to a deep and abiding problem in Christianity as it has surfaced in the powerful history of violence in the name of God that has often been seen in Western history.

The particular articulation of this violence that appears to be rooted in God is expressed as the Hebrew term *herem*, meaning to totally destroy/annihilate (see Deut. 20:10–20, especially noting the difference in treatment of enemies near and far; the verb *herem*, stated in an emphatic form, governs vv.16-18; it recalls the harsh rhetoric of Deut. 7 and intends the annihilation to be a theological act in the interest of preserving the distinctiveness of Israel's faith). Thus *herem* is the ancient conviction that things offered to God as booty captured from the enemy must be "totally destroyed." The verbal form of *herem* recurs in the narrative of Joshua 10, where it is repeatedly rendered "totally destroy" (vv.35, 37, 39, 40). This concept, well entrenched in Israel, is a way whereby raw military violence and the will of God are intimately linked: in this linkage the will of God is seen to justify and authorize and legitimate acts of extermination. The rhetoric mandates nothing less than what today is termed genocide.

The Historical After-Life of Conquest Texts: It may be observed that grounded in the idea of "with God on our side" encouraging Israel forward (see Num. 21:1–3; Deut. 2:31–34; 3:1–7; 7:–6), the book of Joshua functioned and continues to function as a theological justification for appropriating land. In the case of Joshua, "the land of Canaan" becomes the "land of promise" and eventually the "Holy Land." The significant and sometimes overlooked part of this theological-ideological claim is that it makes possible—even easy—the complete write off

of other indigenous populations in the land, either as though they were not there at all or because they had no right to be there. Thus, as Jewish scholar Jon Levenson acknowledges, there is no doubt that the text functions to write out of history the Canaanites in the ancient mixed population of the land.

There is also little doubt that by extrapolation and extension the same texts of land legitimization have functioned in history and in contemporary settings in a parallel way. It may be argued that the current policy of the State of Israel towards the Palestinian population is influenced by such thinking. Before that, the slogan "a land without a people for a people without a land," applied to Palestine as a possible Jewish homeland effectively wrote the Palestinians out of the process. Beyond the particular instance of modern Israel/Palestine, however, the same approach has legitimated European Americans in "discovering" and occupying North America at the expense of Native Americans. Furthermore, in many parts of the world, European colonial policy towards indigenous populations was often warranted from this text.

Biblical scholar Michael Prior argues that the biblical narratives which deal with the promise and gift of land are potentially corrupting in themselves, and in actuality have contributed to war crimes and crimes against humanity in virtually every colonized region, by providing allegedly divine legitimization for Western colonizers in their zeal to create outposts of progress in the heart of the darkness. For him, the continuing identification with war stories in the Bible and the way they have inspired further violence, serving as a model for persecution, subjugation and extermination, makes investigation of these traditions a critical task. He insists that the ethnocentric, xenophobic and militaristic dimensions of the biblical narratives have generally been treated in conventional biblical scholarship as if they were above questioning on moral grounds. Thus many commentators appear to be unperturbed by the text's advocacy of plunder, murder and the exploitation of indigenous peoples, all under the guise of loyalty to the Sinai covenant. Whether this assessment is fully agreed with or not, it acts as a reminder that the book of Joshua and the Deuteronomic traditions that underpin it are deeply troubling: the use of this biblical literature requires great care and attentiveness to how it might be used in the real world.

Dealing with Violence: It might be argued that among the most important tasks for the Bible reader are: (1) facing up to the pervasive tone of

violence in the text; and (2) recognising that this violence constitutes a considerable theological problem for faith communities that take the text seriously. The most obvious place of violence in the text is the conquest tradition in the book of Joshua to claim the land. This violence is of primal importance because the land traditions stand at the centre of Israel's confession and self-understanding: thus violence lies close to the heart of who Israel is. Further, close study of the land tradition confirms that God is deeply implicated in the practice of violence. This represents a theological problem for Christians and Jews who intend the Bible to be a coherent attestation to justice and mercy. The problem intensifies when the violence attributed to God becomes a warrant for violence on the part of people who adhere to God and act on what they perceive to be God's will. Here it is possible to refer to a long history of "religious wars" all on behalf of the will of God. Three strategies are commonly used to overcome the problem of violence in the text:

1. The preferred strategy in many cases in faith communities is simply to read past and ignore such texts, pretending they are not there.
2. An available strategy is to understand such presentations of God's will and character as ideological mistakes; that is, the community has imposed upon God such qualities that do not in fact conform to God's true character.
3. The preferred critical response is to treat God through a developmental understanding, so that a God primitive and violent at the outset becomes over time increasingly merciful and benign as Israel's religious development advances

Each of these strategies has merit and is, yet, unsatisfactory. In the end, the violence of God reflected in the violence of the faith community cannot be readily explained away. If we take the text with theological seriousness, we must entertain the testimony that deep in God's history and deep in God's character are powerful residues of violence that are not easily airbrushed out. Moreover, even in the modern world so saturated with violence, no great imagination is needed to suggest that widely practiced, accepted and sanctioned violence has deep theological roots and strong biblical warrants.

For an interesting and perhaps provocative approach to the violence of God, see [Walter Brueggemann's article "God in Recovery"](#).

Concept Deepening—Herem: The Hebrew term *herem* is variously translated as "exterminate," "utterly destroy," "utterly devote," and "annihilate." As a noun, *herem* is translated as "ban, devoted thing," by which is meant the object of extermination. The concept refers to what is set apart exclusively for the deity to claim and so etymologically is related to the more familiar word "harem," the wives or women exclusively reserved for the ruler.

In Hebrew *herem* functions as something of a technical term (although this is not usually easily recognized in most translations) and is reflective of a difficult dimension of Israel's most elemental faith for the term refers to the religious requirement that everything Israel captures or gains in war—booty as well as people—is to be "utterly destroyed," offered up to God in conflagration or some other mode of killing (thereby acknowledging God to be the real victor in the war). Nothing that a conquering Israel captured from war was to be retained, either as valued plunder for profit or as spared human beings. This practice, sanctioned in the instruction of Deuteronomy 20:16–18, is significant because (a) Torah/Law provides a seemingly unambiguous instruction in this regard and (b) such practice is authorized in the name of the God of Israel.

Note that the authorized wholesale slaughter of enemies is closely linked to the claim of God's sovereignty: effectually God presides over and exclusively claims all that is conquered. According to this claim, anything spared or kept for the benefit of Israel would detract from the fact that the victory belonged solely to God, who fights for Israel. The authorization reflects a dimension of Israel's faith (and by extension Israel's God) that reflects profound violence grounded in a claim of sovereign authority that seems to go beyond any rational legitimacy. Scholar Regina Schwartz sees a close link between exclusive theological claims and religiously inspired (and justified) violence.

The primary instruction in Deuteronomy provides little rational or practical explanation. However, the contrast between the authorization of *herem* for conquered enemies close at hand and the more humane treatment of conquered enemies "very far from you" (see Deut. 20:14–15) may indicate some sort of rationale. This distinction suggests that the practical consideration is that the survival of such peoples close at hand might be a theological temptation and seduction away from Israel's particular identity as the people of God.

It might thus be argued that the instruction and practice of *herem* appear to have pertained only to a most primitive dimension of Israel's political and ideological development during a time when Israel, according to its memory, struggled most deeply for survival in the midst of hostile neighbours (see Josh. 2:10; 10:28–40; 11:11–21). As political and military practices in Israel became established in the monarchy according to the ways of an organized state system, this more primitive practice was doubtlessly superseded. Thus the practice of *herem* does not generally pervade Old Testament assumptions about military conduct; instead it belongs to one slice of Israel's tradition.

The most extensive narrative account of the practice of *herem* occurs in 1st Samuel 15. On the basis of Exodus 17:8–16 and Deuteronomy 25:17–19, the old tradition of Israel took the Amalekites as the paradigmatic enemy towards which Israel was enjoined to deploy a policy akin to ethnic cleansing at every opportunity. In 1st Samuel 15 King Saul compromises the practice of *herem* by saving the life of the Amalekite king and some Amalekite booty at, so he says, the behest of his people. A common-sense approach, uninfluenced by harsh ideology, must have suggested to some, perhaps including Saul, that the destruction of perfectly good cattle was irrational and economically wasteful. That common-sense judgment, according to the narrative, was profoundly opposed by the established authority Samuel who, in this case, represents the voice of the old radical tradition of God's exclusive, often violent claim to all plunder taken in war. This simple, quickly accomplished negation of Saul as king on the basis of the violation of the old ideological commitment to *herem* no doubt served the larger purpose of the tradition in disposing of Saul as a way to make room for David as king. But note that irony is woven into the old practice of *herem* in this story on three counts:

1. Saul is condemned because he "listened to the people" who urged salvage in violation of *herem* (1st Sam. 9; 24), even though Samuel himself had earlier yielded to public opinion against his clear theological mandate with respect to kingship (1st Sam. 8:7, 22).
2. Saul's confession of sin for not killing the Amalekite (1st Sam. 15:24) is rejected, whereas David is readily forgiven when he confesses killing Uriah (2nd Sam. 12:13).

3. Saul is condemned for seizing and saving Amalekite booty (1st Sam. 15:14–15), whereas David does the same thing and his practice is accepted without negative judgment—and even without comment (1st Sam. 30:18–20).

The practice of *herem*, as exemplified in 1st Samuel 15, evidently occupied a prominent ideological place in Israel's self-discernment. This ideological claim however, is unstable and open to more than one interpretation, depending on the circumstances and the interpretive requirements of the case.

Some biblical scholars have developed one way of handling the shocking aspects of the concept of *herem*: they argue that although such a primitive practice may have existed in ancient Israel, in the final form of the text, appeal to the practice is not made for the sake of actual violent destruction but as a way of emphasizing an exclusive theological claim for sovereignty that while ideological is well removed from actual violent activity. That is, the conversion of old memory into biblical claim represents the residual influence of a theological approach that has abandoned actual practice. Such an explanation of how these texts might now be understood theologically has credibility: but at its root it still accepts the idea of an elemental violence rooted in God's claim of sovereignty. This cannot be disregarded or explained away.

The Nature of God, the Contemporary World and Synoptic Assessment:

A critical exploration of the nature of God offers a great number of ways in which important connections can be made to the modern world. Among these, the following may be noted: the difficulty of using the Bible in a literalistic way as a guide to ethics (particularly but not exclusively in relation to the concept of *herem*); the theological dangers of using the Bible as the basis of relating to the "other" and issues of land appropriation (e.g., in contemporary Israel/Palestine, in colonialism, in the history of Ireland); the social and historical impact of texts dealing with positive aspects of the divine (including the focus on "widows, orphans and aliens" as representatives of the marginalized); the significance of how the Bible authorizes engagement with God (e.g., how Moses argues with God to turn away divine anger and potential violence); the hermeneutical importance of the struggle within the heart of God for approaching texts that theologically seem to endorse the use of violence.

