Philip R. Davies, "Reading the Bible Intelligently," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 1, no. 1 (2011): 145–64.

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception is an independent, open-access academic journal dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of innovative research in reception history, broadly conceived, within and across religious traditions.

www.relegere.org
ISSN 1179–7231

Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception 1, no. 1 (2011): 145–64

Philip R. Davies

Essay

Reading the Bible Intelligently

When intelligent and/or educated people wish to learn about science, literature or philosophy, they generally turn to experts, to those who have studied and can pass on their knowledge and understanding. Where the Bible is concerned, this is not generally the case: religiously-minded people will turn to a minister of religion for expertise, or, if not religiously-minded, will often fall into the hands of those for whom it is great literature, or contains coded secrets—or else they will not ask at all, having no interest. What, browsing through their local bookstore, or surfing the Web, could they find to answer to their intelligent search for some guidance in what to make of the Bible, or even to awake their interest in it?

But what if the intelligent person is at a dinner party and has no choice but to engage with their neighbour, who has been introduced as "a biblical scholar?" (Does this ever happen?) What this hypothetical situation may expose is that a biblical scholar is not quite like other specialists. While most

Philip R. Davies is Emeritus Professor at the University of Sheffield.

intelligent people encountering a brain surgeon or a nuclear physicist or an architect at a dinner party will know what counts as an intelligent question, what might they ask a Bible expert? In all likelihood they do not have a clear idea of what a Bible scholar really does, of what counts as expertise in the Bible, other than the ability to quote chapter and verse.

What would a Bible professor ask another Bible professor at a dinner party? Would there be a common understanding of what their expertise means? Professors of philosophy or poetry or of mechanical engineering or oncology enjoy, on the whole, a consensus about what they are doing, even though they will disagree about their own theories and practices. But there is no such concord among Bible experts. Many are seminary teachers, practising hierophants, instructing students during the week (and probably congregations on Sundays) in how the Bible informs their faith. Their expertise will, by whatever direct or devious route, aim at the goal of religious enlightenment and improvement. Behind such an interest lie centuries of learned discourse under the name of "Theology," once the "Queen (now hardly even the Queen Mother) of Science," which has left a rich trail of academic and pseudo-academic writing, a body of "expertise" to be exhumed and anatomized. Non-religious Bible experts find most of this irrelevant. There is, of course, a rather thinner tradition of assailing the Bible as a source of ethics or science (Spinoza, Paine, Voltaire, Huxley, and a spate of more recent atheist fundamentalists) but these writers have established less a body of expertise than of anti-expertise, a denial of the religious quality and function of Bible expertise rather than an alternative way of dealing positively with Bible expertise.

If Bible expertise is not simply Bible knowledge, nor a proficiency in "biblical theology,"[1] what else can it be? The bastion of academic expertise (where even the religiously-orientated Bible "experts" are often trained)—the University—will typically offer expertise in the history of ancient Israel, in the literary history of the books, their "theology" and, in the last generation

[1] Despite its origin as a descriptive exercise (Johann Philipp Gabler, "On the Correct Distinction Between Dogmatic and Biblical Theology and the Right Definition of Their Goals" (Inaugural address, University of Altdorf, 1787)), "biblical theology" has been predominantly a Christian genre, including the sub-genre of "Old Testament Theology." It has rarely if ever been "descriptive" rather than highly evaluative. But the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible offers a theology of neither Judaism nor Christianity, and the status or usefulness of its "theology" is somewhat questionable: indeed, there is a widespread consensus nowadays that it has no single "theology."

or so, newer forms of criticism derived from literary expertise practised elsewhere in the academy—materialist, feminist, post-colonial, etc. Or even, despairing of mining the Bible itself for any more of such "knowledge," will turn to studying the Bible as a cultural artifact through the last two millennia. This will teach us at least that in the past the Bible was important to many people, unlike the present day. But the reasons for that hardly apply now.

It may be helpful to divide Bible expertise into two categories. On the one hand is "scripture," and the function of "scripture" expertise is to explain, reconcile or apply it to those for whom it is of religious value. The goal is *meaning*; the Bible has to *mean*, and the primary mode of discourse is *exegesis*, by which the original meaning is elucidated in terms of its current religious relevance. The general methodology can be described as *emic*,[2] namely, adopting the values of the subject being studied (including the reality and relevance of "God"). On the other hand, non-religious Bible expertise is characterized—for various reasons, no doubt including sheer perversity—by an *etic* approach that appraises its subject from a variety of external viewpoints and value systems. This kind of Bible expertise will often regard "meaning" as anything other than provisional and problematic, but in any case will tend towards two poles: a determined historical meaning ("what the author meant") or an indeterminate modern one ("what the reader construes"). In either case, such meaning is of no great relevance to religious believers, and rarely of interest to the dinner-party conversation. The naïve query: "what is the Bible *about*?" or "what is it *for*?"—in other words, "should I bother to read it and why?" or "why should you waste your time becoming an expert in it?" will attract radically different answers from practitioners of each of these disciplines. One possible answer is "Well, what would you *like* it to mean?"—which is both defensive and mischievous at the same time. An example of this line of attack/defence is the entertaining essay of my Sheffield colleague David Clines, who argued for Bible experts to offer "bespoke criticism," developing tools of interpretation for various interest groups.[3] Clines

[2] On the terms "emic" and "etic" and their meaning, see Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior*, 2nd ed. (1954; The Hague: Mouton, 1967); Marvin Harris, "History and Significance of the Emic-Etic Distinction," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976): 329–50.

[3] David J. A. Clines, "A World Established on Water (Psalm 24): Reader-Response, Deconstruction and Bespoke Interpretation," in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: Continuum, 2003), 79–90.

has demonstrated here and elsewhere the effects of several different methods and approaches on biblical texts, his implied argument being that there is no objective meaning and no objective text.[4] This approach has the authentic postmodern clang, and certainly offers a diverting dinner-party tactic, carrying the whiff of indifference, even of amorality. Perfect for a dinner-party game, and, as George Steiner's novel showed,[5] Hitler's policies could be amply justified from books such as Deuteronomy or Joshua.

This approach, in which certain general theories of literary meaning are applied to the Bible, can easily lead to the conclusion that while its contents may say it very elegantly, what they say, and indeed the analysis of what they say, comes down in the end to a matter of entertainment or at most aesthetic pleasure. The expert can tell you all sorts of things that the Bible might mean and all sorts of ways in which to retrieve a meaning. Hence, one of the few honest criticisms that scripture experts can try to level at their biblical studies colleagues is that they do not take the Bible seriously. It's just another collection of writings, a piece of literature. The response may well be that this is precisely what we need to understand: these texts have been taken too seriously for far too long (and with too damaging an effect). There are now, in any case, already enough people not taking it seriously (and even those to do take it seriously hardly think it merits more than sampling), and even from such a base motive as the preservation of their species, scripture experts can only tell you that you should read it in order to be saved (however indirectly), which I do not think does the Bible any kind of justice, while Bible experts ought to explain why it is a more rewarding read than Jane Austen or Stephen King.

So my contention is that neither religious nor non-religious Bible experts take the Bible seriously enough, and so cannot bemoan the fact that others do not, either. The discipline (or pseudo-discipline) of "scripture" is an in-house discourse and thus not really amenable to intelligent dinner-party conversation. Its practitioners cannot join fully in the conversation except when on their own terms. You have to do God for their expertise to make sense. But is the biblical scholar ready to present the Bible as something of more than antiquarian or aesthetic value—worth a vigorous twenty-minute exchange over coffee, let alone a longer-term and more serious engagement as something

[4] This kind of approach can be seen in his collected volumes (David J. A. Clines, *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967-1998*, 2 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998)), especially vol. 1, 3–221, subtitled "Method."

[5] George Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979).

rewarding, educational, enlightening, provocative, entertaining and instructive? The Bible needs and deserves a place within the contemporary discourse of intelligent people.

Intelligent people, however, have little or no access to intelligent Bible-talk, because, as I am contending, the experts, whether of scripture or of biblical studies, are themselves unable to provide what is needed. Hence intelligent people remain mostly indifferent to, and ignorant of, its contents. They are unaware that it is "true" in any relevant sense or that they can learn anything from it about the world or about humanity or history or society. Centuries ago, no one in Christendom would have doubted that such things could be learned. As Northrop Frye argued, taking his cue from William Blake, the Bible was the "Great Code" of Western culture, the template of every work of literature.[6] But this network of shared cultural discourse has long since unravelled, and what is now left for scripture experts is to defend it for the dwindling mass of intelligent Christians and for biblical scholars to explain how this ancient collection of writings came about, how nicely it reads (or how cleverly the scholar reads it). In the study of culture, philosophy, politics, psychology and aesthetics, the Bible, if on stage at all, plays the part of a corpse to be either walked round or dissected. But this is a body that should be alive, speaking its lines, in energetic and provocative dialogue.

Intelligence, ancient and modern

To resurrect the Bible to life outside the catacomb of "scripture" and beyond the horizon of conventional biblical scholarship, we can begin with some old-fashioned history. Bible experts are (mostly) members of the family of professional intellectuals. Their repertoire entails mastery of biblical Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, knowledge of the relevant documents of the ancient world, some training in philosophical thought, perhaps, and an ability to analyze a text for its vocabulary, style, ideology, composition, rhetorical devices. But I was taught that most of the contents of the Bible, by contrast, were traditional oral literature—sagas, moral principles, proverbs, myths, legends, prayers, oracles, put down in writing, edited, and preserved for reasons not clear to me. Even where great literary creators were invoked, they were usually seen as redactors of material they received (and given letters by way

[6] Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

of designation), organizing the mass of folk literature into literary compositions. In the last few decades, however, something has happened to gladden the heart of the modern Bible expert. We now believe that the Bible—by the way, I mean here the Hebrew Bible: the New Testament is an altogether different animal, to be briefly ridden a little later in this essay—was created by ancient intellectuals. Its producers were a small and literate class who because of their trademark skill of being able to read and write fluently, we call "scribes." But not copyists or clerks: authors, *auteurs*.

Like their modern counterparts, the ancient intelligentsia were in the service of the ruling class and wrote at its bidding in the drafting of letters, treaties, lawcodes, annals and inscriptions for the palace, stories of the gods (myths), prayers and ritual and mantic texts for the temple. By virtue of talent, education, good birth and whatever else, the intellectual is an important asset to government. For government requires intelligence, sophistry and rationality, a broad understanding of the way the world and human nature works. It also gets along well with a certain amount of irony, if not hypocrisy; and these things intellectuals can pull off much better than most.

In the ancient world the intellectuals were part of the ruling caste—but not rulers themselves. Rulers rarely are intellectuals, and do not need to be. But their civil servants did, and they no doubt developed their own system of professional education (and accreditation), their "college," in the context of which a scribal ethos, a professional tradition, was formally defined and passed on. This scribal college therefore also wrote literature that addressed the scribal class itself, and not outsiders. (Indeed, who else was there to read anything?) The Bible contains mostly the canonized repertoire of this class, and its members correspond to the modern intellectual more than to any other modern social group. In short, modern Bible scholars (not priests!) are the spiritual descendants of the biblical authors. The ideas expounded and explored in the Bible are not those of the bulk of the population of ancient Israel and Judah, farmers who produced nearly all the wealth of their economy, but could not read or write and hardly ever left their own village. They are the work of a hegemonic, economically parasitic, intellectual guild. They lived and worked mostly in the city of Jerusalem, where the political and religious power lay and where their professional skills were needed, namely the royal or provincial court and the temple.

Contemporary biblical scholarship thus comprises urban intellectuals studying the work of urban intellectuals. But whereas in a non-literate society the thoughts of the elite were not continuously shared with the non-elite

(whose own ideas could not enjoy the privilege of being permanently preserved), in our modern literate societies intellectuals are expected to use their expertise for society as a whole, or at least with those interested and intelligent enough to want them to (whether or not to the extent that Gramsci advocated for Marxist society).[7] And in fulfilling the role of rewarding our paymasters, contemporary Bible experts can share with them the thoughts of their ancient counterparts. What kinds of thoughts would these be? Intellectual language is notorious for posing questions rather than giving clear answers, while such answers as they give are often tentative and ambiguous, subject to qualification, prevarication and pedantry. Should we expect the Bible to be very different? And what kinds of questions attract intellectuals? Big ones: how the world came into being, what it is made of, how we got where we are, what makes a human being tick, what are the values we should live by, whether we have free-will, what we can know and what we cannot know, how society is organized and how it should be. Again, should we expect these questions to be peripheral to the Bible?

Questions of precisely this kind *were* being asked by the intellectuals of Mesopotamia a millennium before Israel existed. The Gilgamesh Epic explores the nature of kingship, human mortality, human enculturation, and much else, in quite sophisticated terms.[8] The poem of an innocent sufferer, a poetic monologue about a once important and prosperous man driven to disgrace and disease by the god Marduk (the "Babylonian Job") explores the nature of divine dealings with humans and the problems of bearing such apparent injustice. From Egypt, the "Dialogue of a man with his Destiny"[9] considers human fate, the choice between life and death. There is ample evidence that philosophy is embedded in the life of these scribes and their schools. The biblical scribes probably committed their own thoughts at the time of, or soon after, the earliest writings of Greek philosophy, which also began with curiosity about the natural world and its possible links with the unseen world. While we term what the Greeks—and even the Babylonians and Egyptians—did, "philosophy," we do not think of any of the Bible that way. Why not? For that matter, why not classify Plato as a theologian?

[7] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

[8] See now Andrew George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform texts*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[9] See Bika Reed, *Rebel in the Soul: a Dialogue between Doubt and Mystical Knowledge* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1987).

The intellectual (philosophical) ideas of the Bible

Before proceeding, I should declare that I do not overlook the poetry, humour or sheer entertainment that the Bible also contains, and which does not necessarily betray an intellectual authorship. But it must be conceded that while all this is on the whole as good as anything else on offer, it is not better, and there is a lot of bad poetry too (don't bother with Psalm 119, for example: it is doggerel). The enjoyment of the stories of Ruth or the poetry of the Song of Songs is an end in itself, but it has a lot of competition and I do not see any need to promote it. But the claim that much of the Bible is an intellectual product permeated with philosophical reflection should manage to attract some dinner-party interest. We can start the topic by conceding that, just as no modern expert on Plato is expected to be a Platonist (even of the Middle or Neo- sort), no Bible expert should be expected to accept the ideas it puts forth, far less believe in its god(s) or its divine origin. This immediately removes several damaging presuppositions. Rather, the advocate of the Bible will claim that the form of the questions and the shaping of the various answers defines—as they always have, but now in a less dogmatic way—a set of patterns of discourse: it sets a path for the contemporary expert to survey and to follow in whatever ways the contemporary human condition might invite. The Bible expert needs to remind his fellow-guests that the Bible is indeed a canon in the classical sense: a classic repertoire, a model, an exemplar, a repository of works that define a cultural agenda. The writings of the Bible may have been long ago converted into a closed list (or rather, various lists) of texts deemed inspired and authoritative, but this is not how or why they were created, and their subsequent fate does not dictate that we moderns confront them as such. The Bible is far too interesting and enjoyable—too important, even—to be left to the religious, who have done as much damage as good with it.

To this claim a critic may reply that the Bible surely speaks unanimously and unambiguously about a god who is at the centre of everything. This is true, though there is little agreement about what this god means or does; and in any case, very few ancient philosophies did not assume the existence of gods. The central principle of the biblical literature may be that there is only one sovereign deity; but the overriding perspective of Platonic philosophy is the equation of the One, the Good and the Ideal, and modern intelligent people can explore the insights, arguments and implications without needing to subscribe to any system of belief that may offer itself. Indeed, a certain cul-

tural distance is absolutely necessary. The ancient Judean intellectuals were, after all, part of a political system that was totalitarian and even imperial: the earth they inhabited was different from ours, as was their heaven. But there can also be genuinely philosophical foundations for belief in a single god (or even in an intelligent designer, though the intelligence displayed by any imagined creator of the world is undoubtedly of a curious kind). Yet only a single divine monarch or principle makes possible the notion of an ordered, rational or at least comprehensible world, along with a meaningful past and a predictable future. Thus classical Greek philosophy included what we would call natural science, especially the search for laws (which reasonably suggested to them a lawgiver). Monotheism may be claimed in the Bible as disclosed by divine self-revelation but this belief can equally (and perhaps more plausibly) be generated through intellectual deduction, induction or reflection. To the modern intelligentsia "God" is as much a philosophical concept as a culturally embedded (or revealed) dogma.

But it is now time to justify these general observations and present a few examples of the philosophical agendas that occupy the writings in the Bible.

Human nature

Here I will start with Genesis 1–11, which relates the creation of the world and the rise of the human race. The intelligent reader will see that there are two distinct strands of language ("God" versus "the Lord"), two different orders of created things, genealogies varying in content and structure, and contradictory details within the Flood story and in the manner of populating the world—in general, a static and orderly alongside a dynamic creation of the way the world is. The explanation of this is not as important as the mere fact that the narrative therefore represents a *dialogue*, but one that can only come alive through a reader. It lies unresolved in the text, unlike the Socratic dialogues of Plato, where the dialectic is overt. Let's begin with the first voice. Genesis 1 introduces an entirely perfect creation, effected merely by command, in which everything is good and in its ordered place. The climax of the creation is the human race, whose goal is to rule over the rest of creation. Humans are even made in the divine image and instructed to multiply their species. Their progress is marked by an orderly series of procreations, genealogically listed (Genesis 5); eventually, in an equally orderly way, they divide into nations and languages and spread over the earth. But the story is interrupted by something evil: humans somehow "corrupt their way on

the earth," leading to a universal flood that wipes out everything except the family of Noah. Then the process begins again. The mystery here is how this wickedness came about in a world made good, and how the image of God became corrupt. We are not told. But nothing afterwards seems to disturb the progress of humanity in its rule over the world and, at least in this story, no more evil appears.

The other voice in Genesis takes a contrary view: the world is created, but one human only is made, out of clay, and placed within a park in order to maintain it. This is a considerably more modest role for humans. Later it is split into two, male and female. Everything is allowed to these two except the fruit of one tree, but through the persuasion of a snake who tempts the female with the prospect of becoming divine, the humans disobey and are punished by being expelled from the park, condemned to mortality, and to pain and toil throughout their life, after which they will return to the mud they were made from. The story continues with their two sons, one of whom murders the other. His descendants become more violent but also invent various arts and technologies, as if perhaps human violence and human creativity are two sides of the same coin that is our nature. The increasing violence leads to the Flood, after which the god (Yahweh) declares that humans will always be inclined to wickedness and that he is reconciled to that fact. But human ambition to become divine leads to the building of a tower towards heaven, which Yahweh foils, scattering humans over the earth.

The two voices, while following a similar sequence of creation, flood, and dispersal, nevertheless plot respectively an upward and downward trajectory for the human race, one towards expressing the divine image in mastery of the universe, the other towards a miserable existence, caught between the taste (and ambition) of divinity and knowledge of misery, death and disintegration into mud. But their taste of the forbidden fruit has "opened their eyes" and given them "knowledge of good and evil." This sorry creature has a conscience! Perhaps this second voice rehearses the development of the child growing independent of the parent. Or it warns that humanity has transgressed its natural bounds, aspiring to divinity but forever frustrated by death, above animals and below gods, in a space in which we have to define ourselves and perhaps, take responsibility for whatever that means. We also have a gift for violence, art and technology.

The view that everything in the world is as it should be, and that humans have a divine mission to rule and exploit it has been rudely challenged in recent years by the prospect that we might be destroying the earth, and

ourselves with it. At all events, the biblical dialogue manages to articulate a range of perceptions and questions that we can hardly claim to have superseded. The story of Eden is a philosophical myth that is more dramatically and eloquently expressed than any other I know. But it is woven into another myth, one of a world made perfect, but somehow corrupted once yet still, apparently, doing as the creator originally intended. Indeed, after the Flood, humans are allowed to kill and eat animals (as they were apparently not allowed previously). Such is our right.

Whatever these two entangled stories teach, it is not that there is a final divine resolution of the fate of humanity. We can only go forward, but to what? On the one hand, we are made to proliferate ("be fruitful and multiply"), apparently without end: on the other hand we are set upon a path from which we cannot turn back: there is no more access to childhood, security or innocence, whatever is meant by that secluded park. The gate is guarded by an angel with a flaming sword. Of course, if we want to explore further in the Bible, we can find speculation about the end of our path: God will one day destroy all that is bad and recreate perfection, or he will reform human nature, or will bring the righteous to heaven. But in all these scenarios the chilling note is that there are always wicked humans to be disposed of. Once we know the difference between good and evil, some of us (and all of us sometimes) will choose the evil.

Political theory

Among the many agendas to be found in the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy is one about how the ideal Israel should be constituted. This anticipates (perhaps helps to create?) a well-exploited intellectual tradition that includes Plato, St Augustine, Thomas More, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Butler, H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and a good deal of modern science fiction: utopias or dystopias as instruments of social critique. The Israels that these three books place in the wilderness emerge within a narrative framework that describes the formation of a chosen nation (there is no need to treat the narrative as historical unless you want to miss the point entirely). Each book offers a different utopian society, and although the society in question is the divinely chosen people, for modern readers this can be taken as meaning the society that meets the divine criteria—i.e., is ideal.

Leviticus is not easy reading. It specifies a great number of ritual and cultic details. But underlying these is a rationale. The first nine chapters are

devoted to priests and sacrifices, concerns that seem distant from the major preoccupations of the modern world. But in this view of society they are central, since they mediate the relations between human society and the deity, which is crucial for the existence of that society. More specifically, they control society's vital ingredient: holiness, without which humans and their god cannot live together. The world of persons and objects is mapped with invisible lines (like contours or isobars) that demarcate holiness and cleanness: some objects and persons are always unclean (cloven-hoofed animals, lepers, menstruating women, corpses): most humans may be either, and can become clean by various means of purification, mostly washing and sacrificing. There is also the moral realm of guilt incurred by, for example, idolatry, or by sexual intercourse with certain relations (chapter 18). Guilt can be atoned for, individually and, once a year, corporately on the Day of Atonement (chapters 16 and 23). The land itself can become unclean if is not rested every seventh year (chapter 25) and its produce is not tithed.

The invisible contours of holiness are drawn in concentric circles around the god, the priests, the "camp" of Israel and the nations beyond, creating a basically invisible universe that the priests can control. Is this a view of society that can be in any way relevant to modern life and thought? Individuals controlled by a system of rules, interpreted and administered by an elite group, all serving the belief that society's well-being is dependent on harmonious relations with a demanding ruler. Rules that make no sense in themselves, serving no *overt* purpose, but whose obedience is absolutely necessary. Whatever ethical system is entailed is not predicated directly on human or social benefit, but only indirectly by avoidance of divine anger or withdrawal.

Such systems exist: not just religious orders in which obedience and service to a deity are a paramount virtue, but political systems in which a despot and a caste of servants dictate what is good and right, and impose arbitrary rules that benefit the ruler and not the ruled. Worship of the ruler often becomes the essential virtue, to which all are compelled. But if the ruler and the rules are divine, does that change everything? How far are humans permitted, or obliged, how far should they be compelled, to follow such rules? Even in democratic societies, how far do governments behave as a kind of secular priesthood?

The vision of society in Leviticus is expressed in any theocratic system, whether it be one in which Islamic *sharīʿah* is imposed or in which the will of God as interpreted from the Bible is claimed to be absolutely sovereign.

In some sense, all of the biblical societies we are currently reviewing are theocratic, but this is the most extremely theocratic of all. There is no room at all for argument and no place for any notion of consent or debate.

In Deuteronomy, by contrast, theocracy is fundamentally a matter of mutual interest and agreement. Israel is a nation bound to its deity by a legal contract.[10] It opens by reminding its readers how the contract was made and how the deity fulfilled his obligations. As with most modern contracts, the small print requires as much attention as the big print. The big print is keeping away from Canaanites and other foreigners and not worshipping their gods, in return for being given a land and kept safely in it. The small print is in maintaining a righteous society, one that protects the poor, constrains the powerful. Slaves and women, for example, are less badly treated than many of the norms of the time. The Israel of Deuteronomy is administered by elders and priests, is a society of villages and cities in a territory notionally conquered but still rife with foreigners. It does make mention of a monarch, but remarkably anticipates the modern notion of a constitutional one:

> When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear Yahweh his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel. (17:18–20)

It is the framework of a legal agreement that keeps Israel and its God connected, and the bonds of society are also expressed in the form of laws. The agreement and the laws also embrace the monarch. Deuteronomy is also couched in the form of a speech by Moses, in which he seems to be trying to persuade and encourage the people to obey its laws. Like Leviticus, their existence depends on the divine will, one can discern in the laws themselves

[10] It can be argued that the contract is not between equals, and represents something more like an offer that Israel cannot refuse: in other words, it defines a relation of patronage with a "godfather" figure. Such relationships were, however, fundamental to ancient societies, and were not as one-sided as they may seem to a modern democrat. No modern citizen of a democratic state actually has any choice but to be client of the same governmental regime, and can only determine which individuals or parties will act in its name.

and in their rationale a concern for social stability and for the wellbeing of the people, who are addressed now in the plural and now in the singular, as if to underline that the responsibility for this cohesion lies with every person as well as with society as a whole.

The legal, contractual basis of this ideal society can obviously resonate more directly with us, for whom such mechanisms are a standard way of securing and enforcing our rights and obligations. The idea of a religion as a contract, however, is staggeringly bold. We can easily imagine this conception to be the product of the class of lawyers, scribes, civil servants (our biblical intellectuals, in fact), and while it combines two well-established traditional literary forms with which they would have been familiar—the law code and the treaty contract—it fashions from them a vision with some remarkably modern elements. And if this vision requires a god in whom we do not believe? Then let us consider with whom it is that members of a society do in fact contract. For most it is historically the monarchy, now in most cases constitutional. If no such party exists, can a society rest on a genuine contractual basis? If the party does exist, by what rights do they enter the contract? If we abstract the deity from the concept, we do not by any means forestall discussion, but merely open up further problems and issues. These issues confront religious believers as well as non-believers: there are some who deny that their religion is a contract with their deity, or, if it is, that the contract is only with them personally.

The book of Numbers opens directly with a census of those "able to go to war" (1:3), and from that point onwards the portrait of the nation offered is a military one. Such a portrait suits well the narrative context chosen for it, in which the nation is, like a campaigning army, on the march towards a destination to be conquered, living off the terrain and constantly on the alert for attack. Thus, chapter 2 describes the disposition of the camp and the order of marching. The following chapters deal with priestly and cultic matters, but the section ends (in chapter 10) with instructions for the priests to blow the trumpets in time of war as well as on cultic occasions—linking the two kinds of activity. The army marches behind their divine leader's cloud, and when the ark moves, Moses says "Arise, Yahweh, let your enemies be scattered and your foes flee before you," and when it stops, "Return, Yahweh of the massed armies of Israel" (10:35).

The nation is divided into families and tribes, reconfigured as military units: they provide specified numbers of young men to fight. The spatial arrangement of Israel assumes the form of a military camp, and we find a

very military disposition towards discipline. The "rebellion" of the people, wishing to go no further, is a constant theme (see chapters 14, 17 and 20), and the issue of Moses' leadership stands very obviously as a motif of the entire book. Disobedience to the appointed leader is harshly punished. The portrait might remind us a little of a feudal society, with military service entailed to the king by barons and by fiefs to the barons. But in such systems there was a degree of instability: the power of the king rested on the consent of his clients. Here we have a militarized dictatorship, not even a Sparta. Modern instances need not be cited.

Each of these portraits represents a recognizable interest—the priesthood, the lawyers, the military—but also a corresponding and quite carefully thought out vision of what the chosen people of the one god really should be like. Again, these separate visions do not argue with each other, but are laid out side by side, inviting—requiring—the reader to discriminate, interrogate, decide on what the perfect society might look like. It is both a more eloquent and a more open presentation than, say, Plato's *Republic*: it is, as followers of Bakhtin would declare, *dialogic*. Thus, its multiple voices demand *intervention* from the reader. They are not presented as authoritative, even though each comes from the mouth of the same god. They *demand* to be discussed!

Omnipotence, mercy and justice

Justice is arguably a universal human virtue or aspiration, but is not measured entirely by universal standards. But the biblical discussion is again predicated on the existence of a single god. The great justification of monarchy, and especially the divine monarch himself, was to dispense justice. But while in theory a king might be subject to notions of justice that he has not invented, this god isn't, because there is no higher authority. Whatever he declares just must by definition be just. Or not?

When Abraham asks Yahweh in Genesis 18 "Shall the *shophet* (judge) of all the earth not do *mishpat* (justice)?" his question might be interpreted as part of a bargain about letting his nephew Lot escape from the city of Sodom before its destruction.[11] But equally (and perhaps better?) we might read it

[11] I myself offered such a reading in Philip R. Davies, "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding," *Bible Review* 11, no. 4 (August 1995): 24–33, 44–45, reprint "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding," in *Abraham and Family*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington: BAS, 2000), 21–40.

as a question for an examination paper in philosophy. It raises the possibility or impossibility of a sovereign god being characterized as "just." Which is the higher principle, the one god or justice? Is there even room for a principle of justice? But there is another dimension to this paradox: can even a supreme being be both just and also merciful? Clearly not, for if one is merciful one delivers the guilty from their just deserts. Mercy is unjust if it is not universal; but if universal, is it mercy? Mercy and justice are hard to reconcile, and the story of Sodom's fate certainly does not achieve any reconciliation. So where does that leave us?

Let us not imagine that this conundrum occurred only to the writer of Genesis 18. The book of Job deals with divine justice, too, and at three levels. The first is the learned conversation between four, then five men, who aspire to know what the book's author says they cannot know (either because the ways of Elohim/El ("god") are unknowable or because they don't know the events related in chapter 1). The resolution of the story is that Yahweh tells them as much, Job acknowledges this and repents of his rashness.

But at a second level, the framing narrative in chapters 1 and 42 makes an ironic turn by making Job's suffering into the playing out of a wager between Yahweh and the Satan. Since Job was in fact innocent, and did not curse Yahweh, he is rewarded. Yet this conclusion undercuts the divine claim that humans cannot fathom his deeds. It also damages the idea of disinterested piety because any reader of the book may be tempted to conclude that Yahweh *will* reward it.

There is a deeper question. The wager offered to Yahweh by the Satan is as ingenious as Pascal's. If Job curses Yahweh, he proves that there is no disinterested piety and thus no piety at all: religion is self-serving. Any divine claims to morality, and refutation of the Satan's charge, rest in Job's blistered hands. Such an inversion of divine and human power is a brilliant and disturbing stroke.

Yet Job is about justice on the individual level. The point raised by the story of Sodom—and indeed by the whole narrative from Joshua to Kings—is that the whole society is judged on its merits. The concept of "collective justice" is taken for granted in a way that modern individualists will find hard. Yet we can perhaps be instructed to reconsider that we may all as individuals be responsible for the society we live in,[12] and that since we

[12] See Philip R. Davies, "Rough Justice?" In *Bible and Justice: Ancient Texts, Modern Challenges*, ed. Matthew J. N. Coomber (London: Equinox, 2010), for a wider discussion.

are likely to suffer from its shortcomings (climate change, drug addiction, financial crashes), we need to take greater responsibility than we usually do for what our society does.

We can end this particular topic with the author of Jonah, a great satirist himself, who pokes fun at gods that make things happen by "appointing" them, be they storms, fish or short-lived plants, and who ends his story by suggesting that Ninevites are so stupid they *can't* count and *don't* count (any more than cattle). But it still poses a philosophical problem: Jonah wants justice but Yahweh opts for mercy. The weakness of Jonah's position is that if this one god is partisan in choosing one nation (as Jonah himself celebrates in chapter 2), why can he not be partisan in delivering another? The weakness of God's position is that in changing his mind he undercuts the authority of the prophetic message and betrays his own agent. But if he were consistently to obey what humans regard as the principles of justice, he would lose any autonomy. Can we really say that this deity is just and make sense?

History

One of the advantages of monotheism is that it assumes the possibility of a rationally ordered universe, and a meaning to all events. Thus it was open to the ancient Judean intellectuals to replace the universally standard system of observing omens and trying to deduce from them patterns, or extrapolating the outcome of a single event. Instead they could discover the mind of the one god who could dictate events. But they maintained that the only reliable mechanism for doing this was revelation by word or vision: hence they developed the two major categories of law and prophecy.[13] One of the principles of the historiographical narrative that runs from Joshua to Kings is that obedience to the divinely revealed law will ensure national prosperity: disobedience will lead to disaster. Thus, the future is not a mystery but the outcome of human behaviour. The writer of the book of Daniel, however, while agreeing that history is in the hands of the one god, will disagree about human participation by proposing that there is a divine script for the governance of the world that runs regardless of what humans do. The god will allot governance of the world to different kings and kingdoms in turn, until the final kingdom, which will belong to his own people (see chapters 2 and 7 especially).

[13] In fact, since the law itself was revealed to Moses the great prophet, it is also the first and greatest (as well as longest) prophetic message.

But if the book of Daniel has an idea (though not expressed with the fullest clarity) where history will end up, the prophetic books offer a range of alternatives. They focus a good deal on retribution, however. According to Amos, punishment will come on Israel without reprieve (until the reader comes to the last few verses, where there is restoration, at least for Judah). Hosea declares likewise: punishment but some relenting. Apart from Amos (or virtually all of Amos), the prophets agree that Israel will survive. (What would be the point of history otherwise?) But what about the other nations? This universal god has surely not invented them in order to punish Israel, or for Israel to conquer. That is a paranoid notion (as paranoid as the belief that God created the English in order to have the world efficiently governed!) No: God must intend these other nations either to join Israel or to be destroyed. So Ezekiel (30:3) will have them destroyed ("For a day is near, the day of Yahweh is near; it will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations"); likewise Zephaniah (3:6, 8). Habakkuk wants them defeated and plundered (2:7, 22). But the author of Isaiah 43 suggests that the Jerusalem temple will be the cult centre for many peoples.

It is a difficult question: has God created so many nations in order to be able to choose just one, for the sake of which all the others exist? How can you have a chosen nation unless there are others you do not choose? What is the point of being chosen, if everyone ends up chosen? Our modern version of this concerns our species: was the entire universe created for the sake of our planet and its inhabitants? Or must there be other intelligent life forms. Have they the same god(s), or different ones? In either case, there is plenty to keep the dinner party conversation going.

Ethics

Linked to the issue of national history is personal history. The books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes offer very good examples of the philosophical debate about the link between virtue and material prosperity. In Proverbs the general line is that if you behave according to the rules God has set, you will, as Spock says, "live long and prosper." The lazy will go hungry (10:3; 13:4), the kind and just will win respect (21:21), and so on. Job seems to be the perfect example of this. But, as we saw earlier, that book has the Satan ask "does Job serve God for nothing?" The philosophy of Proverbs means that the difference between piety and greed is hard to spot. Indeed, it can lead to the conclusion that anyone who is rich has been virtuous, which in

our own days seems the inverse of the truth more often than not. Ecclesiastes is of a quite different opinion: life is a gift; enjoy (5:18), but don't look for justice or purpose in life. The deserving may expect no more or less than the undeserving (2:21; 9:4).[14] Most of us will accept this is as a fact of human life: some will console themselves with the hope of a final reward (or punishment). But this writer has no concept of an afterlife, and probably speaks more eloquently to the modern unbeliever than to the conventional believer. He does, indeed, accept the existence of a god, and enjoins us to acknowledge this god; but he does not tell us whether it will make any difference whether we believe in this god or not, or whether or not we do anything about it.

A Note on the New Testament

I ought to say something about the New Testament, which I have excluded from my discussion, because it is not the product of a class of intellectuals. Its writings are of a different kind, and focused on the conversion of readers to a particular set of religious beliefs. It is missionary literature. This is not to say that the attentive reader cannot find instructive ideas, or dissonances. But while belief in a god or gods is not necessarily a barrier to modern debate about metaphysics or ethics, a belief in a man-become-god who was raised from the dead and will return in triumph is relatively monologic despite the differences of theological rationalization among its writers. What (to my mind) the New Testament achieves is that through its use of the Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures, it shows the fecundity of its ideas, while in the gospel that it proclaims it shows up in stark contrast the lack of any such gospel elsewhere. The "Old Testament" is not Christian: indeed, if we define Judaism as the religion it has been for two thousand years, it is not Jewish either. It inhabits a world of sacrifices, of prophetic figures, of some real but mostly imagined history; it includes reflection on universal humanity and not just "Israel." It is an "open" canon (in the Bloomian sense), in the way that the New Testament is not, and if read with enough care resists any attempts (including those of the New Testament writers) to close it down and reduce the dialogue to monologue.

[14] In several places, the reader of Ecclesiastes will encounter pious sentiments that contradict plain statements elsewhere. These are not symptoms of authorial dialogic but (almost certainly) represent an attempt by a scribe to bring the book more into line with most of the rest of the writings that now make up the Bible, and perhaps to inject some encouragement to moral behaviour into a book that might otherwise be taken to embrace an amoral outlook.

Epilogue

Once the intelligent reader starts looking for intellectual nourishment in the Bible, it can be found all over. What I have described above is merely a sample. The Bible is rich in philosophy: only the unintelligent, or those let down by the experts, think that it is merely myth, history, or divine law, or oracles, or sacred poetry. Part of the problem is that since philosophy has no literary forms of its own, it uses forms drawn from elsewhere: the letter, the myth, the dialogue. But a larger part is that the Bible comes packaged as a "Holy Bible," as an accessory to religion. As a result, the idea that it contains human thoughts that might be worth taking seriously but critically hardly occurs to the religious believer or the non-believer. To the former, such an idea smacks of humanizing, or blasphemy: to the latter, and especially those who oppose religion and holy books, it is more comfortable to view the Bible as obsolete mythology or merely as wonderful literature. By both constituencies, in any case, it is hardly read, anyway, and there is little danger that its ideas will be encountered in any depth merely by browsing or selecting favourite passage. It really does need to be *read*.

But I blame not intelligent-but-ill-informed persons nor those who claim these writings as scripture and thus as Church property. I blame the experts, of whom I am one. Let us experts start saying what is worth listening to and perhaps our dinner parties will be more exciting, to our fellow guests as well as ourselves.