

What the Biblical Scribes Teach Us about Their Writings

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Abstract

A question often posed to biblical scholars is how they can insist that God is merciful and trustworthy when in many Old Testament texts God is harsh and punitive. The article proposes to interpret such hard texts by examining the biblical scribes' habits of composition—what they noticed, how they saw God revealed in history, and how they told their stories. In the light of these conclusions, the second part of the article examines several difficult Old Testament texts.

Keywords

biblical hermeneutics, biblical portrayals of God, the conquest of Canaan, Hebrew Bible, holy war, Old Testament, the sacrifice of Isaac

Two memorable incidents within the same week recently forced me to look again at Old Testament passages that I, a longtime professor of the Bible, had grown used to bracketing: the portrayals of a harsh and punishing God. The passages I disregarded were the very ones that put off many from further reading. In one incident, a student I had asked to write a paper on biblical portraits of God came back with “No more Bible reading for me!” A day later, a university professor teaching a required Bible course asked me to recommend an essay that might assuage his students' horror at the God they found in the Bible—a God who told Abraham to sacrifice

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his beloved son Isaac (Gen 22), hardened Pharaoh's heart (Exod 4:21, 7:3), slaughtered Egyptian children (Exod 11–12), and commanded the conquest of Canaan and extermination of its people (Josh 1–12).

Can such “texts of terror” (Phyllis Trible's phrase) communicate anything of the mercy and generosity that Jews and Christians insist characterize the God revealed in the Tanakh (the Jewish term) and the Old Testament (the Christian term)? The fact is that the Bible contains verses, commands, and episodes that if read literally and applied directly would contradict the main thrust of the religion taught within its pages. For this reason, Judaism and Christianity developed rules and traditions for interpreting the Scriptures. As the former Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks, puts it, “The rabbis said, ‘One who translates a verse literally is a liar.’ The point is clear. No text without interpretation; no interpretation without tradition.”¹ On the Christian side, Robert Louis Wilken states succinctly the interpretive framework with which the Church Fathers read their Bible:

The church fathers were no less aware than we that the books of the Bible come from disparate authors and different historical periods. Yet the Scriptures they sought to understand was a single book, and all its tributaries and rivulets flowed into the great river of God's revelation, the creation of the world, the history of Israel, the life of Christ and the beginning of the church, the final vision of the heavenly city. . . . Exegesis was theological, and theology was exegetical.²

Employing a variety of interpretive frameworks over the centuries, Jewish and Christian scholars read the Bible as the word of God in the words of human beings, an approach that makes interpretation necessary. Biblical interpretation, it is important to note, did not begin with those who read and heard the Bible. It began at an earlier stage, with the scribes who wrote the texts and arranged them into the books we read today.³ Some of the difficulty we moderns have with the texts in the Bible comes from our ignorance of how the scribes worked. One approach to resolving the difficulty is to look at various philosophies of history and locate biblical historians within that framework. This article will take a simpler approach by describing scribal habits of composition, and then applying the results to some troubling texts. Fortunately, it is possible to get a sense of the scribes' habits by attending to what they noticed, wanted to communicate, and how they visualized divine action. I limit my examination to historical narratives and focus on the Old Testament (Tanakh) but some of my

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1. Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken, 2015), 208. The quotation is from the Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin, 49a.
 2. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 314–15.
 3. For an erudite description of ancient Near Eastern and biblical scribes and their writings, see Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); but also see the critical review by Frank Polak, review of *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* by Karel van der Toorn, *Review of Biblical Literature* (April 11, 2009), <https://www.bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=6755>.

observations may help readers of the New Testament, which draws so heavily on the Old Testament in style and content.

Some Habits of Biblical Scribes

Biblical Scribes Were Interested in God Acting in Their World

In striking contrast to the scribes of neighboring cultures who wrote at length about the gods relating to each other in the heavens, biblical scribes preferred to write of God acting on earth and especially in the affairs of their nation, Israel. To the scribes, God was most clearly revealed in the nitty gritty of family life and national politics, which was then (as now) complicated, ambiguous, and sometimes bloody. Theologians in later ages would learn to speak of God in discursive essays and employ qualifications and refinements, but biblical scribes preferred narratives to interpret the turns of history and God's dealings with human beings. The scribes wrote down what their eyes saw and showed rather than explained, because their faith told them that God was somehow involved even in puzzling and violent happenings. The scribes' theology was thus *historical*, that is, divine activity was discernible in earthly events.

Though modern notions of authorship (authors signing their works) were unknown in the ancient Near East,⁴ scribes managed to put themselves into their writings. As caretakers of their people's history, they were deeply affected by the traumas and triumphs of the nation to which they belonged. Scribes who wrote during the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions of Israel in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE were deeply affected by its horrors. A bit later, the resurgence of national confidence under King Josiah's early reign in the 620s stirred their hopes in the grand promises once made to the Davidic king. Working as they did in the temple and palace and responsible for the records and diplomatic correspondence of the royal court, they inevitably viewed history from the king's perspective—as reigns of kings and succession of empires. One indication of their outlook is that they sometimes simplified “the course of world history” as four empires ruling seemingly in endless succession. The names of the empires might vary (Assyria, Babylon, Media, Persia, Greek, or Roman), but not the number four, which symbolized for them “universal” as in the common phrase “the four quarters of the world.” Though they all shared in the vicissitudes of their own nation, they differed in the national traditions they revered and elaborated. Isaiah of Jerusalem in chapters 1–39, for example, focused his attention on the Lord's promise to protect his city Zion and the Davidic king, whereas the anonymous author of Isaiah 40–55, though continuing some traditions of his illustrious predecessor, found the exodus traditions more meaningful for his purposes.

In addition to the sacral traditions they favored, scribes also differed from each other in their religious experience, poetic gifts, and the way in which their writings were edited by later scribes.⁵ Isaiah of Jerusalem, for example, stands head and

4. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 27–33, 45–49.

5. Van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 143–204, makes a strong case for the continuing development of legal and prophetic traditions, especially for Deuteronomy and Jeremiah.

shoulders above the prophets for his poetic artistry and bold theology that influenced subsequent prophets. The report of David's rise to kingship and his reign continue to elicit the admiration of contemporary critics. In short, scribal writing was *contextual*, shaped by national experience, scribes' choice of sacral traditions, and each tribe's expressive talents.

Third, Old Testament history writing was often designed to surface and celebrate God's glory and highlight the varied human responses, good or bad, to divine actions. Genesis 2–3, for example, lists God's successive creative acts and carefully shows the man responding to God's prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, God's attempts to assuage the man's solitude by creating the animals and then the woman, and God's punishment for eating of the prohibited fruit. The story makes clear divine intent and human reaction. Another example of divine action in history is Joshua 2, which shows the prostitute Rahab, a most unlikely source of divine guidance, providing the Israelite scouts with reliable intelligence on the enemy. A third example of unstated divine guidance of human affairs is the history of David's rise and reign. Readers aware of the promises made to David in 2 Samuel 7 and Nathan's subsequent condemnation of his adultery and murder in 2 Samuel 12 will infer that the son's rebellion and David's flight from the capital are punishments for his sins. David's response of repentance, however, completes the picture of divine justice and human response. Scribes were intent on bringing to light God's ways of acting even if those ways were mysterious, and scribes included in their reports human responses to divine actions. Their writings were thus often *doxological*.

Biblical Scribes Were More Interested in God's Power to Save Than in God's Existence

People of biblical times did not question God's existence; their interest was rather in God's power—what God can save my family and my nation? In the predominantly agrarian and tribal society of ancient Israel, people faced a multitude of threats—tribal rivalries, empires' invasions, raids on their crops, crop failure, infertility, sickness, and the dangers posed by unforgiven personal and family sin. People regarded evil as deeply rooted, typically embodied in the actions of humans either corporate or individual, and virtually ineradicable except by a powerful deity. It is not surprising therefore that Israelites often invoked their Lord as a God powerful enough to protect them: "The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea" (Exod 15:3–4a, NRSV throughout unless noted), and "Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle" (Ps 24:8, 24:10). Israel did not worship the Lord's violence, but the Lord's power to save them. They trusted that their Lord did not exercise power capriciously or irrationally, but only to implement his just will on earth.

Biblical Scribes Saw Their God Revealed in a Unique Way

To the scribes, Israel's God was the only deity in contrast to the pantheons worshiped by their neighbors in the ancient Near East. True, biblical monotheism developed in stages, but in mature biblical faith, nothing happens outside the purview of the sole God who created the world and whose powerful hand appears in everything that moves within it. The unsettling corollary of this view is that loss, misfortune, and savagery occur in God's world as well as joy, fulfillment, and love. The problem of evil thus looms large in the Old Testament, for blame for tragic events cannot be pinned on other deities. Whatever happens, happens in the sight of the one God. The venerable Song of Moses (Deut 32) is blunt: "See now that I, even I, am he; and there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal, and no one can deliver from my hand" (32:39).

Though sovereign over all nations, the Lord is ardently committed to one nation; Israel was a "treasured possession" (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 26:18). So passionate is the Lord's love, according to the Bible, that it quickly turns to jealousy when Israel bows down to other gods. The relationship began in Genesis with God's promise to Abraham and his family, and later found expression in the covenant between the Lord and the nation Israel at Sinai. After both parties ratified the covenant, God's declaration was both a promise and a self-definition: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me ... for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod 20:1–6). Such ardor, almost frightening in its intensity, has to be understood within the covenant relationship that God and the people freely embraced. That relationship is characterized by the Hebrew word *hesed*, that is, a mutual obligation marked by loyalty and open-hearted love. The partners are to remain faithful to each other in good times and in bad. Usually translated as "(loving) loyalty, steadfast love, mercy," the relational quality of the word is nicely illustrated by Psalm 51:3, "Have mercy upon me, O God, as *befits* Your faithfulness (*hesed*); *in keeping with* Your abundant compassion, blot out my transgressions" (NJPS [New Jewish Publication Society], emphasis added). The words "befits" and "in keeping with" in the Psalm capture the psalmist's trustful reliance on the Lord's prior promise to be Israel's true friend.

What can easily be forgotten is that the God who is merciful is also thoroughly just. God cannot abide sin: in "The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers" (Ps 5:5), the verb "hate" means acting on hate rather than only feeling hate. Though Israel's covenant fidelity to the Lord blew hot and cold over the centuries, the Lord's fidelity toward Israel never wavered and was characterized by justice as well as mercy. God frequently punished Israel for its sins, not to take revenge, but that the people might "turn"—away from their sins and toward God. In the Bible, the justice of God does not consist primarily in pronouncing a judgment, still less in

condemning, but rather in bringing situations on earth into conformity with the divine will, for example, to uphold the faithful, put down the wicked, and ensure that everyone has enough. To be precise, biblical justice is not really the opposite of mercy as might be implied in the modern thinking where justice is often contrasted with mercy. Yet when justice and mercy do seem to be in conflict in the Bible, mercy wins out. Two oft-cited texts illustrate the priority of mercy. One is the recurring creed-like formula in which mercy is mentioned first and receives the most emphasis: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty” (Exod 34:6–8; cf. Num 14:18; Ps 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2). God is not blind to Israel’s sins, but never forgets his mercy.

Another remarkable text on mercy and justice is the Lord’s anguished monologue in the prophet Hosea (Hos 11:1–8, NJPS):

I fell in love with Israel
 When he was still a child;
 And I have called [him] My son
 Ever since Egypt.
² Thus were they called,
 But they went their own way. . . .
⁸ How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
 How surrender you, O Israel?
 How can I make you like Admah,
 Render you like Zeboiim [destroyed cities]?
 I have had a change of heart,
 All My tenderness is stirred.
⁹ I will not act on My wrath,
 Will not turn to destroy Ephraim.
 For I am God, not man,
 The Holy One in your midst:
 I will not come in fury.

Bible readers accustomed to see God in the Old Testament either as perpetually wrathful (“ready to blow his top,” as my nephew once put it) or serenely detached may be surprised by the biblical portrayal of the passionate Lord demanding loyal love from covenant partners yet at the same time accepting human failure: “As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:13–14). Such is the God revealed by the ancient Scriptures.

How the Scribes Told Their Stories

The Old Testament is full of stories, but biblical stories do not conform to modern history writing standards, which are still much influenced on the popular level by the

sentiments of the great historian Leopold von Ranke (d. 1886): “[history] seeks only to show the past as it really was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).” The Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (d. 1945) comes closer to biblical usage: “History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.”⁶ Biblical scribes firmly believed they were writing history, for like historians today they intended to give an account of the past for their own generation. But they did it their way. They interpreted the past by composing narratives, but narratives of a certain type.

The following homely axiom may get at the biblical way of writing history more clearly than a definition: we today are “two-paragraph readers” encountering “one-paragraph writers.” When we interpret an event, we customarily describe it “objectively” in the first paragraph, and in the second, give an interpretation. For example, if we were asked to write up a seemingly miraculous cure of a cancerous patient, we would first report the patient’s physical condition, previous treatments, and diagnoses, and then, in a separate paragraph, give various interpretations, for example, of the doctors, family members, priest, minister, or rabbi. Each interpreter might interpret “the facts of the case” differently, but each would begin with “the facts.” Biblical scribes, however, faced with an extraordinary event, composed the story to highlight the wondrous element in order that God be praised and people be instructed in the right path. Scribes added, highlighted, or omitted narrative details to achieve these purposes. Such history writing of course frustrates modern historians who want to get at the facts, at “what actually happened.” But modern historians can’t get past the interpretation, for it is woven into the biblical narrative. The story itself *is* the interpretation. Moderns who brand such writings with condescending terms like “unhistorical” or “theological fiction” only show their inability to understand this genre of history writing.

Another distinctive feature of biblical history writing is that plots often prefigure events in the future and human agents are sketched with an eye on their descendants. The latter fact is not surprising, for from earliest times (even prior to the first mention of bodily resurrection in the second-century Dan 12), individuals and nations were believed to live on through their progeny. Abraham and Sarah in Genesis are good examples. For the 25 years that they were childless, they could be reckoned to be as good as dead, but once Isaac was born, they were reckoned as alive, for Isaac would carry on their line. As is widely recognized, Abraham and Sarah were held up as inspirations for an Israelite nation demoralized and dispersed in exile; the exiles must have wondered whether they as a nation would again live in their native land. The couple foreshadow their descendants’ experience when they escape famine in Canaan by going down to prosperous Egypt (Gen 12:10–20), which their descendants will repeat centuries later (Gen 42–50). Another example of the deeds of descendants appearing in the life of the founder is the book of Joshua’s account of the conquest of Canaan. The book portrays the conquest as three successful campaigns under a single national

6. Leopold von Ranke, *History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations 1492–1514*, “Preface.” Huizinga, “A Definition of the Concept of History,” in *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), 9.

commander, Joshua. Judges 1, however, more realistically describes the conquest as a gradual and only partially successful affair led by tribal commanders. Modern historians are even more skeptical of the Joshua account. A partial explanation is that the scribes who composed the book of Joshua ascribed to the “founder” (Joshua) a gradual and complex process that took centuries. (We will return to the conquest below.)

Four Texts of Terror

I will now attempt to apply the observations made above to several historical texts that disturb many readers. I will try to view the texts as the scribes might have viewed them, interpreting them as displaying God acting in history and humans responding. The first text to be examined is Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac, which in the eyes of some readers justifies child abuse by legitimating a father killing his son in obedience to God’s demands.

Abraham’s Sacrifice of His Son Isaac (Genesis 22)

Reading this famous passage merely as a simple tale of a father’s willingness to kill his son in obedience to a demanding God fails to appreciate its context, intention, and symbolism. How should we interpret the story? Scholars generally agree that the entire Abraham cycle of stories, though probably of early origin, was collected and arranged for a specific audience in the sixth and subsequent centuries. Its audience was Israelites, many of whom had been exiled by their Babylonian conquerors to places far from their beloved homeland. These exiles, and their beleaguered fellow Israelites left behind in a devastated land, feared they would never again live safely in their beloved homeland as a distinct people. To them, God’s promises belonged to a long-gone past; those promises were no longer valid. In response, the scribes who brought together and artfully arranged the stories in Genesis 11–25 underlined the shared plight of Abraham and Sarah and their displaced and discouraged descendants. Both Abraham and Sarah and their descendants are without a homeland; Abraham and Sarah are “sojourners,” the King James translation of Hebrew *gērîm*; the modern term is resident aliens. Both the ancestors and their descendants could be called “dead” because Abraham and Sarah had no progeny to continue their line; their descendants’ children faced a similar uncertain future. Genesis 11–25 shows Abraham and Sarah struggling to believe that the land on which they lived would one day be theirs and that they would have a son to continue their line. For 25 years the couple lived without a son, and even longer without possessing a land.⁷ No wonder that Abraham and Sarah came into prominence during the sixth-century exile. A prophet of that period, Second Isaiah, exhorted the dispersed population: “Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many” (51:2).

7. Form critical analysis of Genesis has tended to treat the two promises of land and of promise as separate, but in that world, families could not survive without a land to supply their food and clothing.

In two pivotal chapters of the Abraham cycle, the representative role of the couple is especially clear: Genesis 12 and 22, the first concerned with land and the second with progeny. In Genesis 12, God tells Abraham to leave behind the land his family had settled on (in today's northern Iraq) and go to another land. In Genesis 22, God tells Abraham to "leave behind," metaphorically, the child born to him naturally in order to receive the child back as a pure gift. Scribes placed the two divine commands in parallel by the repetition of words and phrases in both chapters. In an oral and non-print culture, repetition and parallelism functioned like modern footnotes, titles, and headings.

- Abraham's call in 12:1, "Go from your [land] . . . to the land that I will show you" is echoed in 22:2, "go to the land of Moriah . . . on one of the mountains that I will show you";
- In 12:1 and 22:2, Abraham is told to surrender three things, each more heartrending than the previous: "your land, your clan, and your father's house," and "your son, your only son, the one whom you love, Isaac." One triplet refers to the promise of land, the other, to the promise of descendants, but the two are in balance;
- 12:5, "Abram took his wife Sarai . . ." corresponds to 22:3, "[Abraham] took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac";
- 12:5, "When they had come to the land of Canaan," is echoed in 22:9, "When they came to the place that God had shown him";
- Abraham's altar building, expressing the sacredness of a place or deed, in 12:8 corresponds to his altar building in 22:9.

The correspondence of the two chapters draws attention to the central themes of the ancestral stories—the dual promises concerning land and progeny and Abraham's faith-filled and unhesitating obedience. In both chapters, Abraham must give up something precious in order to receive something even more precious. In chapter 12 he must give up his ancestral land to acquire a new land,⁸ and in chapter 22 he must be ready to give up his beloved son to receive him back as a pure gift. Abraham was able to give up his native land and his beloved son because his trust in God was so profound. These two scenes form an arc within which other events in the Abraham cycle have been arranged in chiasmic order.⁹ It is not difficult to see how an exiled and

8. Genesis 10–11 provide the context for understanding the importance of land in the ancestral stories. Each of the 70 nations is given a territory in Genesis 10, and in Genesis 11 begins its journey (after first refusing) to take its assigned territory. The context clarifies the threefold command to Abraham in Genesis 12:1, to leave his land (*'ereṣ*), his relatives (his clan; *mōledet*), and his *bēt 'āb*, his father's house (his immediate family). In place of these comforting realities, God tells Abraham to go to "a land that I will show you," not even naming the land.

9. The chiasmic arrangement of the material between chapters 12 and 22 is as follows: the wife-sister stories in 12:10–13:1 and 20; Lot's foolish choice in 13:2–18 plus Abraham's consequent rescue of him in chapter 14 corresponds to Lot's foolish choice in chapter 19 preceded by Abraham's (preliminary) rescue of him in 18:16–33; and the J covenant with

dispirited people would be encouraged by the Abraham cycle, for they would conclude that our venerable ancestors likewise had to endure a long period of waiting before seeing God's promise of land and progeny come true. A further consideration is that by the time the scene in Genesis 22 unfolds, Abraham has learned to trust from three decades of dealing with the Lord.

Another theme must be factored into the interpretation of Genesis 22: the father giving up his son only to receive the son back from God. In Genesis, the theme first appears in Genesis 22, appears a second time (in ironic form) in Genesis 38, and a third and climactic time in Genesis 43. In Genesis 38, Jacob's son Judah refuses to allow his only remaining son, Shelah, to marry Tamar. After a bizarre turn of events, he discovers to his astonishment that the twin boys he fathered unwittingly by Tamar was God's way of giving him back the two sons and increasing his family. Recognizing God's hidden activity, he can only stammer, "She [Tamar] is in the right, not me, since I did not give her to my son Shelah."¹⁰ The final appearance of the theme of the father giving up his son and receiving him back occurs in Genesis 43 when Jacob reluctantly "gives up" the sole remaining son of his beloved Rachel, Benjamin, by allowing him to go to Egypt with the other sons. In all three instances, the father receives back the son he gave up. Abraham receives Isaac back; Judah receives back two sons, Perez and Zerah, to replace Er and Onan; and Jacob receives back not only Benjamin but Joseph as well.¹¹ But the first step, the giving up, is painful, the father has first to give up his beloved son.¹²

Unless one appreciates the symbolic character of the episode and its pivotal place in the Abraham cycle, one will likely misread Genesis 22. Some biblical narratives are, to be sure, simple and straightforward, but Genesis 22 certainly is not. Readers have to understand that Abraham and Sarah were meant to inspire later generations.

Abraham (chapter 15) corresponds to the P covenant (chapter 17). After the climax of the cycle is reached in chapter 22, chapters 23–25 deal with subsidiary matters: Abraham's purchase of a burial cave for Sarah (chapter 23), finding a wife for Isaac (chapter 24), the list of Abraham's children by his secondary wife Keturah (25:1–6), Abraham's death (25:7–11), and Ishmael's death and descendants (25:12–18).

10. Genesis 38:26. For the translation "She is in the right, not I," instead of the usual, "She is more righteous than I," see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 265.
11. The third occurrence is the climax of the series. Jacob receives not only Benjamin, but also Joseph. And with Joseph's return, Jacob himself comes to life, rising again to his full stature as patriarch who pronounces the destinies of his sons in chapter 49. For the classic analysis of the theme of the resurrection of the beloved son, see Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
12. Christian readers will see a further instance of the father giving up his beloved son in Romans 8:32: "He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not with him also give us everything else?" The Greek word in Romans translated "withhold" (*paradidomai*) is the same as in the Septuagint of Genesis 22:12 and 16.

God's Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

In Exodus 4:21, God tells Moses to perform the plagues (the Bible prefers the term “signs”) in the sight of Pharaoh, but says that “I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go” (Exod 4:21; cf. 7:3 and 9:12). That God would harden Pharaoh’s heart so that his continued defiance would bring down on Egypt the death of their firstborn, and do it with the aim that everyone see God’s glory, seems a breathtaking instance of divine cruelty and vanity. The Hebrew phrase, however, does not at all imply that God is taking away Pharaoh’s freedom, for the Bible presumes humans are free and in fact constantly exhorts humans to do what is right. The Lord hardening Pharaoh’s heart is only one way of describing Pharaoh’s response to the ten plagues or signs (described in Exod 7:8–12:36). Other passages say that Pharaoh hardens his own heart, for example, Exodus 7:22; 8:15, and 32. The first phrase expresses an utterly theocentric perspective on human action, that is, everything comes from God (the second scribal habit). The alternate phrase, Pharaoh hardening his own heart, is more common, and underlines the free actions of the humans in the Exodus story—Moses, Aaron, Pharaoh, and the Egyptian court magicians. The “theocentric” and “historical” viewpoints are not mutually exclusive; one emphasizes divine agency and the other, human agency. Both perspectives illuminate each other. God does indeed control all actions, yet humans remain free and their actions are determinative.

The Killing of the Firstborn of Egypt (Exodus 12:29–36)

After Pharaoh refused to let the Hebrews go to serve their God in the wilderness, “At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead” (12:29–30). Like Genesis 22, Exodus 12 is not a disinterested report. Rather, it describes a divine judgment that brings to a conclusion a series of “signs and wonders” meant to display the Lord’s sovereign power and glory and convince Pharaoh he must let God’s people go to serve him.

Some background is needed to understand the killing of the firstborn in Exodus. In the Israelite conceptions, the firstborn of both man and beast was thought to belong to the deity and had to be given back, either directly by the actual sacrifice of the animal or by a ritual substitution, which was obviously the normal practice for human firstborns. At the beginning of the exodus story (Exod 4:22–23), the Lord had told Moses to relay a message to Pharaoh: “Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, ‘Let my son go that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.” The assertion has to be understood within the framework established in the book of Exodus: the conflict between the Lord and Pharaoh is a contest between two “gods” for the allegiance of the Hebrews in Egypt. Pharaoh, who in the story arrogantly elevates himself to the level of a deity, demands the Hebrews’ “service.” (As in English, the Hebrew word for “service” can mean both divine worship and menial labor.) In demanding the people’s exclusive service, Pharaoh refuses to let the Hebrews “serve,” that is, worship their

true Lord. The ten plagues were sent by the Lord to demonstrate true divinity and persuade Pharaoh to let the Hebrews worship the Lord. By the third plague, Pharaoh's courtiers acknowledge the Lord as God—"the finger of God is here" (Exod 8:19)—and urge Pharaoh to do the same, but he stubbornly hardens his heart and refuses to let the Hebrews worship. Only against this background does the Lord's threat to Pharaoh make sense (Exod 4:22–23): "Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son." The Lord's pronouncement is not a crude expression of revenge, but an announcement that Pharaoh as a mere human being must acknowledge God as the true Lord of the Hebrews by giving up the firstborn of Egypt.

The symbolic aspect of the Hebrews' liberation from pharaonic oppression has to be appreciated as in the case of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. The book of Exodus views the conflict between the Lord and Pharaoh symbolically as a struggle between two "deities" for the allegiance of the Hebrews: the true deity (the Lord) versus the false deity (Pharaoh). Both "gods" demand the loyal service of the Hebrews, but, by means of his powerlessness before the plagues, Pharaoh is exposed as a pseudo-deity and forced to make the ultimate act of worship of the true God: giving his firstborn to God. If a reader fails to recognize the true stakes, the entire section is reduced to a story of a cruel and vengeful God punishing a foolish Egyptian king.

The Israelite Conquest of Canaan

Joshua 1–12 describes the Israelite conquest of Canaan as three rapid and successful campaigns under the leadership of a single commander, Joshua. The biblical book that comes next after Joshua in the Bible, the book of Judges, has a much different version of the conquest in its first chapter: individual tribes under a variety of leaders battle for smaller pieces of the territory with some campaigns unsuccessful. The Israelite conquest of Canaan is customarily dated to the thirteenth century BCE though extra-biblical confirmation of the event is sketchy. Both books, Joshua and Judges, are now incorporated into the Deuteronomistic History (a modern term), a compendium of accounts of events from Moses in the thirteenth century down to the Babylonian exile of the sixth century. Scholars agree the conquest account in Joshua 1–12 in the Deuteronomistic History was given its final shape some six hundred years after the events it describes. One can easily see how the third scribal habit has shaped the account: a much later national consciousness was retrojected into the time of an ancient tribal chieftain, Joshua. The book of Joshua simplifies the complex and gradual process as three successful campaigns under a single commander.

The above remarks about literary composition, however, do little to ameliorate the most disturbing element in the conquest account: the Lord's command to Joshua to kill all captives, "to devote them all to destruction" (Hebrew: *ḥāram*). The Hebrew verb is translated into English in a variety of ways; none soften the harshness: "to observe the ban," "to exterminate," and "to doom." Joshua 6:21 is a particularly horrifying sentence: "Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys." The idea behind the ban is that God won the

victory and thus deserves all the spoils. God might share the booty with the soldiers, but in theory all the booty belonged to God as the sole victor. Some spoils of war—gold, silver, swords, and other material goods—were readily transferred to the divine world by placing them in the temple, the house of God, but living beings, humans and animals, could be placed in the divine world only by removing them from this world, that is, by killing them. How can modern readers not be shocked at the just and compassionate God of Israel demanding the slaughter of people whose only “crime” was living in Canaan?

There are hints in Joshua that Israel did not practice the ban as uniformly as the victory scenes suggest. The alternate account in Judges 1 implies that the book of Joshua simplified the Israelite conquest. And if we look at some of the encounters between Israelites and Canaanites in Joshua, we glimpse personal connections missing in the battle reports. In Joshua 2, Rahab risked her life to save the two Israelite spies from certain death and provided them with reliable intelligence on Canaan. Sensing future victory for the Israelites, she made a deal with the invaders and saved her family. In chapters 9–10, the inhabitants of the town of Gibeon, likewise seeing the folly of joining Canaanite kings in resisting the invaders, disguised themselves as immigrants and made a treaty of friendship that the Israelites never would have signed if they had known the Gibeonites were native Canaanites. But Israel later honored the treaty at great cost to itself.

Even with these qualifications, however, Joshua and Judges present a grim picture of the Lord. Other Old Testament passages interpret Israel’s relation to the “the Other” in far different terms: the opening chapters of Genesis portray a generous God who gives territory to each nation (10:15–19); in Genesis 11–50 the ancestors have respectful relations with their Canaanite neighbors, even acknowledging occasionally the superior virtue of a neighbor (Gen 20); the psalmists invite the nations to join them in praising the Lord; and the Bible persistently champions the poor, the fatherless, and the landless.¹³

Unfortunately, it is not possible to give a satisfactory explanation of God’s role in the Israelite conquest of Canaan, for the very good reason that we do not fully understand how the conquest happened. Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, most American and Israeli scholars accepted the basic historicity of Joshua 1–12 though conceding that it simplified and compressed a complex invasion. But as more biblical sites were excavated and surveys of highland occupation collected and studied more closely, it has become clear that archeological data do not support a literal construal of the account in Joshua. The late Harvard archaeologist Lawrence Stager stated his conclusions succinctly: “Of the thirty-one cities said to be taken by Joshua and the Israelites, twenty have been plausibly identified with excavation sites. Of these, only Bethel and Hazor meet criterion 1 [the rebuilt city must show a different material culture than the destroyed city], and even there, it is debated.”¹⁴

13. For a thoughtful review of the practice of the ban in its biblical and modern contexts, see R. W. L. Moberly, “A Chosen People,” in *Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 41–74.

14. Lawrence E. Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University, 1998), 90–131 at 131.

The debate continues and the problem is not fully resolved. Many scholars today would accept the provisional interpretation of the conquest by P. Kyle McCarter of Johns Hopkins University, because it takes account of the biblical and (meager) non-biblical data. Though lengthy, McCarter's observation is worth quoting in full.

[The conquest] seems to have had two phases, one of peaceful settlement in the hills and one of conflict with the cities of the lowlands. Surveys of Israel and Jordan show that the central highlands were sparsely populated before 1200 BCE, when a marked expansion began. Most of the newcomers were agriculturalists, not nomads. They seem to have been of mixed origin, arriving from several directions and settling in villages. Certain continuities in material culture, including pottery and architecture, suggest that a substantial number came from the Canaanite cities of the lowlands. These peoples made up the bulk of the population of later Israel. They aligned themselves with an existing group called Israel, who were already living in the region, as shown by a reference made to them in about 1207 BCE by the Egyptian king Merneptah. The resulting larger community developed a strong sense of ethnic identity, sharply separating themselves from the peoples of the neighboring lowland cities, whom they eventually grew strong enough to conquer or assimilate in a process that was not complete until David's capture of Jerusalem in the tenth century BCE. It was probably the memory of this process that gave rise to the tradition of Joshua's conquest.

Archaeology has cast doubt on the historicity of many of the specific victories described in Joshua, including especially the battle of Jericho, which was not fortified at the time of the Israelites' arrival. The story of the crossing of the Jordan and the first victory serves the theological purpose of presenting the conquest as a part of Yahweh's plan for Israel, the means by which the land promised to the ancestors was acquired. The crossing into the sacred realm and siege of the first Canaanite city are presented in ritual terms, while the divine participation in the war is made clear (Josh 5.13–15; cf. 10.12).¹⁵

Stager stresses the religious basis of the conquest:

Israel developed its self-consciousness or ethnic identity in large measure through its religious foundation—a breakthrough that led a subset of Canaanite culture from a variety of places, backgrounds, prior affiliations, and livelihoods, to join a supertribe united under the authority of and devotion to a supreme deity, revealed to Moses as Yahweh. From a small group that formed around the founder Moses in Midian, other groups were added.¹⁶

McCarter's and Stager's conclusions illustrate several scribal habits: scribes wrote their history with a doxological purpose; they composed it as a coherent story; and they attributed later developments to a remote ancestor.

The construal of the conquest sketched above has implications for interpreting God's command to exterminate the Canaanites. It suggests that the text's insistence on

15. P. Kyle McCarter, "Conquest of Canaan," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t120/e0154>.

16. Stager, "Forging an Identity," 142.

devoting the inhabitants of Canaan to destruction was at least partly a metaphor for rejecting every feature of native Canaanite religion and for remaining loyal to Israelite religion's exclusive commitment to the Lord. The archaeological evidence, plus hints in Joshua and Judges 1, implies that the account of the conquest of Canaan in Joshua condenses into a simple narrative a gradual and complex process. The account in Joshua 1–12 should not be taken as a literal report and used to justify violence against people of other cultures and religions.

The interpretation of the Israelite conquest of Canaan presented above allow us a glimpse of how the biblical scribes interpreted God's actions in their history. They show that interpretation began not with the hearers and readers of the Bible, ancient or modern, but with the people who actually wrote the Bible, the scribes. Knowing something of their methods and habits allow us modern readers to appreciate what they intended to do and (equally important) what they did not intend to do. Scribal culture began a long tradition of Jewish and Christian interpretations, a tradition that has not yet ended.

Readers of the ancient Scriptures continued to interpret, giving different slants on texts of violence. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) offers a radical alternative to violence. Many early Christians refused to be soldiers, Thomas Aquinas proposed a just war theory to mitigate war's effects, and the American Catholic bishops have criticized hasty resort to warfare. Jewish interpretation has been concisely summarized by Rabbi Sacks:

Judaism survived through its scholars, not its soldiers ... Fundamentalists and today's atheists share the same approach to texts. They read them directly and literally, ignoring the single most important fact about a sacred text, namely that its meaning is not self-evident. It has a history and an authority of its own. Every religion must guard against a literal reading of its hard texts if it is not to show that it has learned nothing from history.¹⁷

Both Judaism and Christianity in fact developed sophisticated ways of thinking about religious violence and other matters, showing they indeed learned to interpret wisely their hard texts.

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17. Sacks, *Not in God's Name*, 218–19.