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THE MORALLY DUBIOUS PASSAGES OF THE HEBREW BIBLE: AN EXAMINATION OF SOME PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critique of some of the strategies deployed by biblical scholars, past and present, who have attempted to come to terms with the ethically problematic passages of the Hebrew Bible. Among the strategies examined are: the evolutionary approach; the cultural relativists' approach; the canon-within-a-canon approach; the holistic approach; the paradigmatic approach; and the reader-response approach. It is argued that the reader-response approach provides the most satisfactory strategy for dealing with the unsavoury aspects of Scripture and that biblical scholars must be prepared to engage in an ethical critique of the Hebrew Bible. In order to provide some focus for the discussion, each strategy is examined in relation to one of the most notorious parts of Scripture, namely, the account of Israel's conquest of Canaan as recorded in Josh. 6–11.

Introduction

Anyone who has been concerned to apply the teaching of the Hebrew Bible to the needs and concerns of the present world has had to contend with the fact that it is, in many respects, a highly problematic volume (Carroll 1991). It is not merely that it contains various contradictions, improbabilities and errors of fact; it is not even that much of its teaching appears to be outmoded and to bear little relevance for contemporary Jewish and Christian faith and practice. The problem, rather, is that it often appears to advocate moral standards that seem to us to be offensive and unacceptable (Kaiser 1983: 247-304). Those who enter the world of the Hebrew Bible encounter a culture in which slavery and polygamy were accepted as the norm and in which violence, intolerance and hatred of

enemies seem to have been the order of the day. Many of its laws (such as that governing the rebellious son in Deut. 21.18-21) appear, by our standards, to be harsh, cruel and intolerably vindictive, and even some of the motivations given for right conduct (riches, honour, long life) seem morally suspect. Several of the narratives recorded in the Hebrew Bible (such as those that describe the massacre of the Canaanites by the Israelites in Josh. 6–11) relate acts of extreme violence and bloodshed, and—to make matters worse—such acts are often performed at the express command of God himself (cf. Deut. 7.1-2; 20.16-18). Even the book of Psalms, so often regarded as the high-water mark of Israel's faith, frequently breathes a spirit of unbridled revenge and malice, and exhibits an attitude of exclusivism and provincialism that smacks of the worse type of xenophobia (cf. Pss. 109, 137).

It is important at the outset that the nature of the problem is not overstated, for the amount of material that is unedifying to an offensive degree is not great, and we would probably not bother to read the Hebrew Bible at all if it did not embody a far greater proportion of acceptable norms than those we might want to oppose or question. But while it would be mistaken to magnify the ethically problematic passages of Scripture, it would be equally mistaken to minimize them, for their very presence has caused people, over the centuries, to raise questions concerning the canonical status of the Hebrew Bible, its underlying authority and its continued use within the Church. As long ago as the second century CE, Marcion suggested that the Hebrew Bible should be excluded from the canon of Holy Scripture and should form no part of Christian revelation (von Harnack 1924; Blackman 1948; cf. Barton 1997: 35-62 for a critique of von Harnack's conclusions). However, few today would take such a suggestion seriously, for the Early Church regarded the Hebrew Bible as authoritative Scripture and it has always assumed a normative status within the community of faith. Yet, paradoxically, this is precisely what renders the Hebrew Bible problematic. Were it not for the fact that it has been granted canonical status, it could be regarded as simply another random collection of books from antiquity that could be read and valued just like any other body of literature. But the fact is that the Hebrew Bible is part of the authoritative Scripture of the Church, and Christian believers might therefore expect these writings to confirm their beliefs, practices and values. If so, it is likely that they will often be disappointed, for its teaching at times appears to be at best irrelevant, and at worse, morally perverse.

It is thus not surprising that biblical scholars have sought various ways to mitigate the offending passages of the Hebrew Bible, and the purpose of

the present article is to offer a critique of some of the strategies that have been proposed. In order to provide some focus for the discussion, however, it may be useful to consider how each approach has sought to come to terms with the moral difficulties raised by the account in Josh. 6–11 of Israel's conquest of Canaan. These chapters describe the conquest of the land in the most graphic and chilling terms. After capturing Jericho, the Israelites are reported to have 'devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys' (Josh. 6.21). They then proceeded to capture and burn the city of Ai, killing all its inhabitants, a total of 12,000 people (Josh. 8.24-25). The inhabitants of Makkedah were also destroyed by Joshua and the invading army (Josh. 10.28), and a similar fate awaited the inhabitants of Libnah (Josh. 10.29-30), Lachish (Josh. 10.31-32), Eglon (Josh. 10.34-35), Hebron (Josh. 10.36-37), Debir (Josh. 10.38-39) and Hazor (Josh. 11.10-11).

The feeling of revulsion that modern readers of the Hebrew Bible are bound to experience when reading such narratives is heightened by the fact that such atrocities were not only permitted or condoned by God but were expressly commanded by him (Josh. 10.40; cf. Deut. 7.1-2). Clearly, such passages, which appear to justify what today would be termed 'ethnic cleansing', raise profound and disturbing ethical and moral questions. What edification and guidance for faith and practice can such narratives possibly have? How can such a portrayal of God, and such outrageous behaviour on the part of his people, possibly be recounted without a hint of censure or disapproval? It is hardly surprising that such passages have sometimes been appealed to in order to question the very authority of the Bible itself (Bright 1967: 241-50). For this reason, these passages may prove a useful 'test case' to examine the merits and defects of the various strategies that have been proposed to alleviate, if not remove, the ethical difficulties encountered as we read some of the morally dubious passages of the Hebrew Bible.

The Evolutionary Approach

One time-honoured solution to the so-called 'difficult' passages of the Hebrew Bible is what may be termed the 'evolutionary' approach, which was in vogue during much of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth (Fosdick 1938). This approach developed largely as a result of the scientific principle of evolution and the idea of progress. Scholars of the period argued that the whole sweep of human history should be inter-

preted in accordance with the evolutionary laws of science, and on this basis it was concluded that all cultures must have evolved gradually from a lower to a higher level of civilization. The crude, primitive, superstitious beliefs and practices of earlier epochs inevitably gave way with the passage of time to more advanced and sophisticated ways of thinking as human society continued on its upward spiral of growth and progress. Indeed, it was believed that all cultures had passed through similar stages of social and religious development, as human nature progressed to ever-higher levels of achievement (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 24-25; Rogerson 1978: 22-45).

Such was the preoccupation with the idea of evolution and historical development during this period that it was inevitable that such factors should have come to influence the way in which the Bible was interpreted. 'Progressive revelation' was regarded as the key to understanding Scripture, just as 'progress' and 'evolution' were the keys to understanding human history. The more primitive concepts of Israel's early period gave way, in time, to more advanced and cultured ideas as God's people gradually developed in their moral perception and felt their way on matters of religious and ethical import. Israel's morality was seen as historically conditioned, and the Hebrew Bible was interpreted as bearing witness to a gradual refining and modification of the people's ethical understanding (Arnold 1844; Maurice 1841; cf. Rogerson 1984: 191-92).

This development was frequently depicted in terms of a process of 'education' (Temple 1861). Just as a child advanced in knowledge and discernment on the way to adulthood, so human beings progressed under divine guidance as they attained ever-higher levels of ethical and religious insight. God was likened to a skilful teacher who revealed his moral demands to his people only to the extent that they were able and ready to receive them. The divine revelation at any given time was inevitably limited by the capacity of humans to comprehend and assimilate, for, as Frederick Temple remarked, the 'whole lesson of humanity was too much to be learned by all at once' (1861: 8; cf. Orr 1906: 465-78). The Bible was regarded as none other than the record of the religious education of God's people, and the moral life of Israel was seen as one of constantly expanding ideals. It was readily conceded that there were occasionally some minor setbacks in the development of Israel's moral and religious thinking, but this did not shake the basic conviction that this development could be traced in evolutionary terms. Thus, for example, although it was recognized that the achievements of the great classical prophets were followed in the post-exilic period by a more ritualistic and legalistic emphasis, this was usually

viewed as nothing more than a temporary aberration, since the highest levels of moral discernment in the Hebrew Bible were not reached until later times, as witnessed, for example, in the book of Job (Smith 1923: 320). Of course, the climax of the entire development was seen as lying beyond the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament, for the teaching of Jesus far transcended anything that could be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, so profound were the ethical injunctions contained in the gospels that they were regarded as the norm against which everything else in the Bible could be measured (Kennett 1925: 385-86; Bewer 1930).

The influence of the scientific evolutionary approach on the study of the Bible may be seen in numerous publications that appeared during this period purporting to trace the history of Israel's religious and moral pilgrimage. In this regard, the pioneering work of Julius Wellhausen (1883) must be mentioned, for he sought to restore the documents of the Hebrew Bible to something approximating their proper chronological sequence, and he believed that once this task had been accomplished it would be possible to trace the development in Israel's religious and moral ideas. According to Wellhausen's evolutionary-historical model, early Israel exhibited a low sense of morality akin to her Canaanite neighbours, but this gradually developed by various stages (animism, polytheism, henotheism) into the sublime ethical monotheism of the classical prophets. Many scholars readily embraced Wellhausen's evolutionary approach (cf. Mitchell 1912; Smith 1923), and so deeply rooted was the idea that Israel's religion and morality had progressed gradually from the simple and rudimentary to the more complex and sophisticated that attempts were occasionally made to arrange the chronological order of the various traditions according to the stage of moral progress in Israel's history that they were thought to reflect. The more primitive the religious teaching, the earlier was deemed to be the source. For example, the so-called 'ritual decalogue' of Exodus 34 was widely regarded as older in origin than the 'ethical decalogue' of Exodus 20 (cf. Wellhausen 1889: 332-33). To the mind of the day, influenced as it was by the theory of evolutionary progress, such an approach to Israelite morality was regarded as so self-evident that it was rarely even questioned in scholarly circles.

It was, perhaps, inevitable that such an approach should come to have an impact upon the way in which the morally dubious passages of the Hebrew Bible were assessed. In the first place, the fact that the customs, beliefs and mores of Israel emerged only gradually over a period of several centuries meant that due allowance had to be made for the fact that there were constant changes in Israel's ethical ideas and moral behaviour. The ethical

apprehension of the people in the period of the Judges, for example, was bound to be inferior to that which existed at the time of the great prophets, just as the moral perception that existed at the time of the prophets was inevitably inferior to that which pertained at the time of Jesus. It was a gross oversimplification to suppose that all parts of Scripture could be regarded as equally true and valid simply because they were all the product of God's revealed will; rather, each injunction had to be evaluated and assessed in relation to its place in the development of biblical revelation as a whole. Viewed in this light, the offensive passages of the Hebrew Bible did not prove quite such a stumbling block for the Christian believer, for any dubious ethical pronouncements that it might contain simply reflected the misconceptions of the age, and were by no means to be considered as injunctions that were still morally binding. As Richardson observed, the notion that biblical ideas were susceptible to historical development meant that 'it was no longer necessary to believe that the divine command to Saul to slaughter the women and children of the Amalekites was on the same level as the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount' (1963: 302).

Further, adherents of the 'evolutionary' approach insisted that the moral teaching of the Hebrew Bible must be viewed in terms of its eventual outcome in the teaching of Jesus (Dodd 1938: 269-85). The biblical text bore witness to a gradual refining and modification of peoples' ethical understanding, and it was only right that the biblical tradition be judged on the basis of the point at which it eventually reached, not the point at which it originally started (Mozley 1877: 222-53). This meant, in effect, that only those ethical pronouncements in the Hebrew Bible that were consonant with the teaching of Jesus could truly be regarded as normative; all else represented outgrown stages in human religious development and could therefore be discarded with a clear conscience.

For many biblical exegetes in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the evolutionary approach provided a plausible and satisfying solution to the problem posed by the troublesome passages of Scripture. It was viewed as a way of preserving the best of the ethical teaching of the Hebrew Bible without having to dismiss it wholesale, as Marcion and his followers had done. Moreover, the strategy was based on a principle that seemed perfectly sound and irrefutable, namely, that ideas of morality in every culture were subject to the corrections of time, and the same, *mutatis mutandis*, must have been true of the culture of ancient Israel. The ethically unpalatable parts of Scripture could thus be explained away as the product of Israel's primitive mentality, and as reflecting an early stage in the nation's religious development. Thus polygamy, for example, was viewed as a

phenomenon that characterized the early period of Israel's history; as the nation advanced in her ethical perception, the custom gradually fell into desuetude and was replaced (precisely when is not known) by the more acceptable practice of monogamy. Similarly, such practices as human sacrifice, divination and sorcery belonged, for the most part, to Israel's early period and were later prohibited (cf. Deut. 18.10-11) as a more enlightened and sophisticated outlook began to replace the twin evils of ignorance and superstition.

Proponents of the evolutionary approach did not argue that contemporary readers should reject or dismiss the primitive ideas of the Hebrew Bible out of hand; they merely argued that such ideas should be acknowledged for what they were: necessary stages on the route to a deeper and more profound understanding of human ethical obligation. If biblical teaching was to be taken seriously as a source of moral guidance, due allowance had to be made for the fact that its moral norms evolved gradually over a period of time, and it was only reasonable and logical that its ethical values be judged accordingly.

Now the evolutionary approach has occasionally been deployed in order to explain, if not to excuse, the kind of atrocities perpetrated by the Israelites against their enemies in the book of Joshua (cf. LaSor, Hubbard and Bush 1996: 148). It is emphasized that the accounts of such violence and brutality are found primarily in the earlier traditions contained in the Hebrew Bible; as the centuries advanced, a more humane and pragmatic attitude to war began to emerge (cf. van Oyen 1967: 183-84). Indicative of this development was the fact that some of the classical prophets were prepared to condemn the atrocities associated with war (cf. Amos 1.3–2.5), and by the time of Deuteronomy various limitations were imposed upon the practice of warfare so that excessive killing and wanton destruction could be avoided. Enemies were permitted to surrender and thus save their lives (Deut. 20.10-11) and special rules were prescribed for female captives enabling them to be taken as wives by the Israelites (Deut. 21.10-14). Of course, the development in Israel's attitude towards warfare was inevitably slow and gradual, and the pinnacle was not reached until the time of Jesus, who openly renounced all violence and enjoined a more conciliatory attitude towards one's enemy (cf. Hobbs 1989: 230-32). It was ultimately in the light of his pronouncements, especially as reflected in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7), that the more primitive and brutal aspects of warfare in the Hebrew Bible were to be judged.

The evolutionary approach to the Hebrew Bible, however, has been criticized on many fronts (Smart 1961: 79-80; Goldingay 1990: 58-59). In the

first place, the strategy is seriously flawed in its assumption that Israel's ethical understanding evolved gradually from a more primitive to a higher level of morality. The various views encountered in the Hebrew Bible concerning warfare, for example, do not suggest that attitudes in Israel necessarily became less brutal and more humane with the passage of time. Thus we find Jeremiah in the sixth century BCE calling upon God to bring judgment against Babylon by 'putting all her warriors to the sword' and leading them all 'to the slaughter' (Jer. 50.27; cf. 51.3-4). Similarly, the book of Esther (belonging perhaps to the fifth century BCE) has been viewed by some as reflecting a return to 'a primitive ethic of war rich in bloodthirsty vengeance' (Niditch 1993: 120; cf. Est. 8.11; 9.5-6). Again, Hosea's disapproval of the bloody revolution that Jehu brought about at Elijah's request (Hos. 1.4) is *earlier* than the apparently approving tone of the Deuteronomic account preserved in 2 Kings 9. The evidence at our disposal simply does not support the view that Israel's ethics evolved in a gradually ascending scale of values. In brief, the crude, social-evolutionary schema of the nineteenth century did not allow for the fact that there were peaks and troughs in Israel's moral understanding throughout her history, and that periods of moral advance were frequently followed by periods of moral regression.

Further, the lack of consensus among contemporary scholars concerning the date of the various traditions contained in the Hebrew Bible (Rendtorff 1977; Schmid 1976; Van Seters 1975; 1999; Whybray 1987; for an excellent review of recent scholarship, see Nicholson 1998) should make us very wary of using the biblical documents to support a pattern of evolutionary development in Israel's thought. In fact, recent sociological analyses of the Hebrew Bible suggest that different groups in Israel probably held different ethical norms simultaneously, and the likelihood is that both primitive and sophisticated ethical perceptions were in vogue at the same time (Barton 1983: 117-19).

But perhaps the most serious indictment of the evolutionary approach is that it tends to disparage much of the ethical values enshrined in the Hebrew Bible. By making the Christian gospel the yardstick by which all else is to be judged, adherents of this strategy in effect make the injunctions of the Hebrew Bible appear outmoded and irrelevant. After all, what point is there in tracing Israel's blundering, faltering steps when one's time could more profitably be spent contemplating the divine revelation in its purest and most perfect form in the teaching of Jesus?

Despite the popularity of the evolutionary approach in its day, and its continued influence upon some biblical scholars, it is clear that this strategy of dealing with the unsavoury aspects of Scripture is far from satisfactory.

The Cultural Relativists' Approach

Proponents of this strategy emphasize that the texts of the Hebrew Bible evolved out of a particular historical, social and cultural situation and must be understood in the context of the society for which they were written. The biblical authors expressed their insights in terms appropriate to the times in which they were writing, and it was therefore inevitable that they should reflect the attitudes, outlooks and beliefs of the people of their age. It would thus be a gross distortion to try to wrest the moral teaching of the Hebrew Bible from its historical moorings and transport it across the centuries with the aim of applying it to a totally different cultural situation (Nineham 1976: 106-107). Rather, it must be recognized that the ethical values of the Hebrew Bible are historically conditioned; they were promulgated for a particular people at a particular time and in a particular place and were not necessarily intended to have universal application. In fact, we do the Bible a grave injustice if we try to absolutize its claims and present them as if they were intended to be binding for all times and all places. For adherents of this approach, the Bible is an ancient book and no interpretative sleight-of-hand can make it anything else.

Such an approach to the text of the Hebrew Bible has been welcomed by—among others—feminist critics who have been concerned with the secondary status of women as reflected in many biblical texts. The offending passages, it is argued, are merely a reflection of the beliefs and customs of people who had very different frames of reference from our own and who belonged to a cultural system far removed from the one that we inhabit. The so-called 'sexism' of which the biblical writers are so often accused is simply the inevitable product of the male-dominated world to which they belonged, and the subordinate position of women that they appear to advocate merely reflects the social and cultural conventions of the time (Meyers 1988: 139-64). We may well feel that the biblical writers have been unfair to women, but the fact is that *we* would be unfair to *them* if we failed to see them in the context of their own predominantly patriarchal society. The biblical statements that appear to be demeaning to women must be read in historical terms and should not be regarded as permanently prescriptive for all time.

Now, in some respects, the strategy deployed by the cultural relativists seems eminently plausible and it cannot be denied that it has a certain logical appeal. Few would doubt that the Hebrew Bible must be viewed in the light of its particular historical context, and most would probably accept that many of the customs and provisions that it records belong to a bygone age and can no longer be regarded as binding in our own secular, pluralist society. After all, nobody today would seriously entertain the prospect of putting to death a man who indulged in homosexual activities (as demanded by such texts as Lev. 20.13), nor would they ask a woman suspected of adultery to prove her innocence by drinking a noxious potion prepared by a priest (as was the custom in ancient Israel according to Num. 5.11-31; cf. Davies 1995: 48-57; Brichto 1975; Frymer-Kensky 1984). We fully accept that these are ancient laws and customs designed for peoples of ancient times, and know that it would be nothing short of ridiculous to take them as they stand and apply them to our contemporary society.

Yet, the type of approach associated with the cultural relativists is not without its difficulties and it begs questions for which we have no satisfactory answers. What grounds do we have for singling out some texts as culturally relative and others as permanently prescriptive? What criteria do we have for separating what is time-conditioned and irrelevant from what is permanent and valid? Moreover, the cultural relativists' approach inevitably courts the risk that the morality of the Hebrew Bible will come to be regarded as outmoded, obsolete and irrelevant, having little or no bearing on issues of contemporary concern. Far from responding to the needs of our world, the Hebrew Bible will be regarded as a document of purely antiquarian interest, reflecting how the people of a particular period responded to the issues of their day.

Further, the approach adopted by the cultural relativists tends to exaggerate the difference between our culture and that of ancient Israel. According to this approach, we can never bridge the cultural divide that separates us from the people of biblical times, nor can we wave a magic wand and find that what Karl Barth (1933: 1) called 'the differences between then and now' have somehow miraculously been erased. But while it is true that a chasm separates us from those who wrote the biblical texts, the divide is not necessarily unbridgeable, for behind the different cultural patterns between our society and that of ancient Israel there lies a striking uniformity (Redfield 1957). The two cultures are held together by certain shared beliefs and common values, such as an abhorrence of incest, disapproval of rape, and the distinction between murder and manslaughter. Such

examples, which could easily be multiplied, merely serve to emphasize that there are cultural 'constants' as well as cultural differences between our society and that envisaged in the Hebrew Bible, and that the two cultures do not differ significantly with regard to what are considered to be the ultimate ethical goals. We must not, therefore, over-emphasize the remoteness of the biblical world from our own, nor exaggerate the inability of the modern reader to enter into the cultural ethos of the biblical authors, for although we inhabit different worlds of moral discourse, we are, nevertheless, inheritors of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and thus stand in some degree of continuity with the people of biblical times (Goldingay 1990: 53).

At this point, it may be salutary to consider how this strategy might be applied to such passages as those encountered in Josh. 6–11. Adherents of this approach would want to emphasize that the violence perpetrated by the Israelites against the native inhabitants of Canaan must be viewed in their proper historical perspective (Hobbs 1989). Wars in the ancient world were, by their very nature, unspeakably cruel and brutal, and it must be recognized that the kind of actions attributed to the Israelites, however reprehensible they may appear to us, were 'normal in the social, political, religious and cultural context of the time' (Mason 1997: 75). It would thus be 'hopelessly anachronistic for us to pass moral judgments about the severe cruelty in war…in the light of what we would want to claim as the more humane feelings of a modern, educated, liberal conscience' (Mason 1997: 74). Moreover, it is argued that when such passages as Josh. 6–11 are placed in the context of their time and culture, they may not be quite as reprehensible as they might ostensibly appear, for the wholesale destruction of the Canaanites recounted in these chapters was not intended as a sanction for hatred, violence and vindictiveness; rather, it was part of a set ritual—referred to in the Hebrew Bible as the 'ban' (Heb. *ḥerem*)—according to which the population of captured cities and even their animals and belongings had to be destroyed since they were regarded as a kind of offering or sacrifice to God (cf. LaSor, Hubbard and Bush 1996: 148).

Such arguments, however, seem highly questionable from an ethical point of view, for it is surely disingenuous to try to excuse the wholesale destruction of the Canaanites by saying, in effect, 'Not to worry! This was normal practice at the time and this is how all enemy nations were treated during this period'. As Barr has rightly remarked, there 'can be no moral extenuation on the grounds that Israel simply fitted in with what was normal in the environment' (1993: 211). Moreover, it is questionable whether the kind of genocide practised by the Israelites in Josh. 6–11 was,

in fact, 'normal' in the ancient Near East at the time, for there is no indication in the ancient sources that any other culture (apart from the Moabites) placed the enemy under a 'ban' and massacred them in the way in which the Israelites are reported to have exterminated the Canaanites (cf. Brekelmans 1959: 128-45; Kang 1989: 80-82). Thus the actions of the Israelites can hardly be excused on the grounds that they were merely acting in conformity with the normal practice at the time.

The fact is that it is all too easy, in discussing the ethically dubious passages of Scripture, to retreat into the safe haven of cultural relativism, stressing how time-bound and culturally-dependent the writings of the Hebrew Bible are. The strategy associated with the cultural relativists gives the impression of being merely a convenient way of side-stepping the problems caused by the biblical commands and customs that happen to conflict with our own rational and moral judgments. Moreover, the strategy has the unfortunate effect of instilling in contemporary readers an unhealthy ethnocentricity, confirming their belief that all other cultures are to be scaled and rated with reference to their own.

The Canon-within-a-Canon Approach

This approach recognizes that we are bound to find in the Hebrew Bible material that we will regard as offensive or unpalatable, and it invites us to sift through the biblical texts in search of what we may find useful and valuable as a source of ethical guidance in our lives. We are encouraged to balance the moral statements of Scripture in our own scales of ethical judgment, extracting the principles that we regard as instructive and enlightened from those that we regard as dubious and questionable. The material that we deem to be edifying can be retained, and that which we find objectionable can be discarded. 'Use what you can' is the slogan of this approach, with the implicit corollary that what turns out to be unusable or unsuitable can be jettisoned without any qualms. In effect, this strategy invites us to form our own 'canon' of texts based on the wider canon of Scripture, and by adopting this approach we are encouraged to focus upon those features of the biblical tradition that are more central and relevant to our faith (cf. G.E. Wright 1969; Dunn 1982).

Such a strategy has proved particularly popular among those with a particular axe to grind (for examples, see Rodd 1995: 5-6). Thus, those of a conservative disposition who oppose the ordination of women to the priesthood tend to focus on the early chapters of Genesis (cf. Gen. 2.20-24) or selective quotations from Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 14.34-35; Col. 3.18),

while neglecting passages that appear to strike out in favour of women's equality (cf. Gal. 3.28). Those who favour capital punishment point to such passages as Gen. 9.6, while conveniently neglecting the fact that the Hebrew Bible calls for the death penalty for those guilty of adultery (Deut. 22.22) and those who strike or curse their parents (Exod. 21.15, 17; Lev. 20.9).

Scholars who seek to construct a theology of peace on the basis of the Hebrew Bible have similarly found the 'canon-within-a-canon' approach to be particularly amenable. Faced with the numerous accounts of violence and brutality in Scripture they have, of necessity, been 'highly selective in their choice of material' (Hobbs 1989: 14). Thus, passages such as those in Josh. 6–11 that describe the complete annihilation of the Canaanites at the express command of God are conveniently shunted to one side, allowing the reader to focus instead on texts that contain lessons of a more salutary nature, such as the importance of 'beating swords into ploughshares' and 'spears into pruning-hooks' (Isa. 2.4; cf. Gottwald 1964: 308). Laws that command the Israelites to massacre the native inhabitants of the land (cf. Deut. 7.1-2) are overlooked in favour of those that demand care and respect towards the sojourner and resident alien (cf. Exod. 22.21).

Now the adoption of the so-called 'canon-within-a canon' approach has many obvious advantages. The first, of course, is its basic simplicity, for it involves the easiest of all tasks: that of winnowing the ethically acceptable material from that which is more unpalatable. By means of this process, the Hebrew Bible is immediately divested of all the antiquarian elements that are no longer regarded as valid, and of all the laws and customs that would today be regarded as abominable and abhorrent. *Some* line has to be drawn between that which is valid and authoritative and that which is obsolete and outworn, and, according to adherents of this strategy, this seems as good a way as any to draw it.

In the second place, the strategy has the merit of acknowledging openly what everyone (except the most ardent purist) takes for granted, namely, that the Bible cannot be accorded equal authority in all its parts, and that everything contained in it cannot be regarded as equally binding upon the Christian (cf. Dunn 1977: 374-76). Most of us, for example, would happily endorse the commands of the decalogue concerning murder, theft and adultery (Exod. 20.13-15), but would entertain serious qualms about putting to death a particularly recalcitrant son (Deut. 21.18-21). This approach recognizes, in a reassuringly honest and forthright way, that Scripture is by no means always morally edifying, and that we are bound to accept some of its provisions while rejecting others. Moreover, from a purely practical

point of view, the strategy can claim to be one that is entirely necessary, for we cannot reasonably be expected to be familiar with the entire content of the biblical teaching; the sheer quantity and variety of material which the Bible contains makes it inevitable that readers will have to be selective in their approach and prioritize certain passages over others. By inviting us to regard as binding only those parts of the Bible that we find ethically acceptable, the 'canon-within-a-canon' approach permits us to adopt the biblical passages of which we approve, while allowing us to reject passages that might conflict with our deeply ingrained sense of what is right and proper.

Further, this strategy may justly claim at least some measure of support from within the Scriptural tradition itself, for the writers of the New Testament, in quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures, tend to focus on a select number of books, and make no attempt to appeal to a representative sample from within the Hebrew Bible as a whole. It is estimated, for example, that approximately half the explicit quotations from the New Testament come from Isaiah and the book of Psalms (Barr 1983: 61; 1999: 386; Evans 2002: 186). In a similar way, Jewish tradition has accorded the Torah pride of place, regarding it as more authoritative than other parts of Scripture, and in this sense the Torah may be said to have formed a sort of pre-canonical 'canon-within-a-canon' (G.E. Wright 1969: 179-80; Barr 1983: 83). Thus, Scriptural tradition itself appears to have questioned the notion of a flat, level canon that had equal authority in all its parts, and it could be argued that there is, therefore, a biblical warrant for the selective approach to the Hebrew Bible advocated by the proponents of this strategy.

Despite its advantages, however, this 'pick and choose' approach to the ethics of the Hebrew Bible must be viewed with some reserve. In the first place, it gives the impression of regarding the reading of Scripture as an exercise rather akin to visiting a restaurant, where the individual is invited to select from the menu what appears to him or her to be most appetizing; by adopting such a strategy, nobody need come from the Bible (any more than they need leave the restaurant) without finding at least something to suit their particular taste. But it is doubtful whether such an eclectic and selective approach to biblical morality can be defended, for there is something vaguely spurious about a strategy that invites us merely to ignore those passages of Scripture of which we do not approve. The clear danger of such an approach is that the ethical values that we derive from Scripture will turn out to be no more than expressions of our own personal preferences, and that the biblical passages that we will embrace will be those

that happen to conform to our own instinctive assumptions about what is right and proper. Thus those who focus exclusively on passages in the Hebrew Bible that speak of universal peace and harmony can hardly claim to furnish us with a 'biblical ethic'; rather, they merely provide us with a distillation of the ethical values that they themselves happen to regard as appropriate and acceptable.

Secondly, the criteria used to decide which parts of Scripture may be deemed acceptable and which may not often appear to be nebulous, ill defined or arbitrary. One suggestion, for example, is that a distinction should be drawn between the moral and ritual requirements of the Hebrew Bible, and that the former should be retained while the latter should be discarded (cf. Bright 1967: 53-54). Thus such moral enactments as those concerning fairness in the judicial process, or respect for one's neighbour (Lev. 19.15, 18) are still regarded as relevant and acceptable, while ritual regulations such as those concerning the types of sacrifice that had to be offered or the various festivals that had to be observed (Num. 28–29) are clearly no longer valid or applicable. The difficulty with this suggestion, however, is twofold. In the first place, the Hebrew Bible itself draws no such distinction between its moral and ceremonial laws; all were given by divine command and all were considered equally binding. Secondly, it is by no means clear that all the moral laws in the Hebrew Bible can be regarded as acceptable as they stand, nor is it clear that all the ritual or ceremonial laws are to be regarded as outmoded or irrelevant. For example, no one today would uphold the 'moral' requirement to impose the death penalty on those who commit adultery (Lev. 20.10; Deut. 22.22) or curse their parents (Exod. 21.17; Lev. 20.9). On the other hand, the principle of 'tithing' advocated in the 'ritual' law of Lev. 27.30-33 is still accepted in some churches, and adopted by many Christians as an ideal by which to measure their giving.

For these reasons, many have expressed considerable reservations concerning the 'canon-within-a-canon' approach as a method of dealing with the morally dubious passages of Scripture (Lönning 1972; Goldingay 1987: 122-27; 1995: 105-106). It is regarded as a convenient way of glossing over the more objectionable features of biblical teaching without having to reject it wholesale. Ultimately, the method does not face up to the difficulties encountered in Scripture; it merely provides a convenient strategy for escaping from them by permitting the reader to privilege some parts of the Hebrew Bible over others. The unfortunate effect of this preferential weighting of the biblical teaching is that it violates the integrity of

the Bible as a whole and relegates some parts of Scripture to a position of secondary importance.

The Holistic Approach

In many respects, this strategy is diametrically opposed to the 'canon-within-a-canon' approach. According to this view, to single out some texts while rejecting others is merely to distort the biblical witness and to demean its very essence. If justice is to be done to the message of the Hebrew Bible, we must take the entire canonical evidence into consideration and eschew any attempt to privilege any particular portion of it (Childs 1970: 130-38; 1985: 6-17; Sanders 1984: 22-25; 1987: 155-74; Birch and Rasmussen 1976: 175-84). In reading the Bible, we must constantly bear in mind the meaning and import of the message as a whole, for this will inevitably influence the way in which we interpret individual texts. Scripture is viewed as a vast canvas in which the individual details are not as significant as the picture as a whole. Just as we cannot properly appreciate a masterpiece if we stand too close, so we cannot properly interpret Scripture if we focus exclusively on particular passages. Individual incidents and isolated precepts must be measured in the context of the entire thrust of biblical revelation, for reading the Bible involves the elucidation of the whole in relation to its parts and the parts in relation to the whole. Thus the plea of those who adopt the holistic approach is quite straightforward: let us not try to elicit ethical norms from isolated texts but look, rather, at the broader picture and go by the general impression of the biblical message as a whole. Scripture establishes certain norms and values as acceptable and others as unacceptable, and whatever impression is left by individual incidents or provisions, there is a general drift to be discerned which makes it abundantly clear what is required and what is prohibited (Barton 1983: 123; 1998: 12-13). Unlike the 'canon-within-a-canon' approach, therefore, this strategy does not reject the unpalatable parts of the Hebrew Bible; it merely allows us to view them in a broader perspective, and enables us to read Scripture untroubled by some of its more unsavoury aspects.

According to adherents of the holistic approach, therefore, the so-called 'offensive' passages of the Hebrew Bible are problematic only when viewed in isolation; if we consider the message of the Bible as a whole and respect its overarching perspective and overall intention, the ethically objectionable passages do not prove to be quite such a stumbling block. Thus, for example, passages that depict the wrath of God must be seen in the light of

his ample manifestations of love and grace; passages that portray him as a vengeful and bloodthirsty deity must be set alongside those that depict him as patient, long-suffering and slow to anger; passages that cast him as fickle and capricious must be understood in the context of those that depict the basic consistency of his purpose and the unchangeableness of his character. Similarly, texts that appear to incite hatred and intolerance towards the enemy must be viewed in the light of those that command love of one's neighbour (Lev. 19.18); those that reflect an unfavourable attitude towards foreign nations (Deut. 23.1-2, 20) must be viewed against those that exhibit a concern for the needs of the stranger and resident alien (Exod. 22.21; 23.9).

At first sight, this strategy of dealing with the morally difficult passages of Scripture appears to be very attractive, for in one fell swoop it manages to smooth over the aggressiveness of some biblical passages and to defuse some of their more inflammatory statements. Moreover, readers are not burdened with the responsibility of having to choose between the competing voices of Scripture, accepting some while rejecting others, for the holistic approach invites them to discover a basic coherence in the Hebrew Bible despite its different emphases and the plurality of its witnesses. Further, by reading the Hebrew Bible in the light of its dominant emphases, and taking cognizance of its broader perspective, readers are prevented from limiting or distorting its moral witness and they are provided with a kind of control by which to appraise some of its more dubious ethical statements. They cannot twist the biblical message to mean what they want it to mean, or blow some bits out of proportion to fit some preconceived position of their own, for they are required to pay careful and disciplined attention to the canonical context as a whole, and it is *this* context that must be regarded as authoritative for the meaning of the text. After all, it was on the basis of the broader, canonical vision of the Bible concerning the dignity of human beings that the Church eventually opposed the institution of slavery, though both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament accepted its existence without demur. The Church, in effect, was able to take a step back and see that the institution was not in harmony with the broader view of love, justice and equality found in Scripture. Not surprisingly, therefore, the holistic approach to the interpretation of the Bible has been regarded by many as eminently plausible, for it is argued that by taking into account the whole range of material presented in Scripture, and discerning its general drift, readers are more likely to arrive at sensible, balanced conclusions as they interpret the biblical texts.

When the holistic approach is applied to such ethically problematic passages as those encountered in Josh. 6–11, the merits of this particular reading strategy are immediately apparent. The moral difficulties posed by such passages are not played down but they *are* viewed in a more nuanced light. Seen in the perspective of the canon as a whole, the clear message conveyed is that the violence and brutality that accompanied Israel's conquest of Canaan belonged entirely to Israel's past and were on no account to be repeated in the future (Childs 1985: 78-79). The prophets never exhorted the Israelites to wage a holy war against their enemies; rather, they envisaged the future age as one of universal peace which God himself would inaugurate (Isa. 2.1-4; 11.1-9). Thus, according to scholars such as Childs, just as the gross immoralities of the patriarchs (Bainton 1930) may be seen in a more favourable light when viewed against the background of such texts as Pss. 105 and 106 (Childs 1992: 679-80), so the annihilation of the Canaanites may be seen in a different light once the 'inner dynamic of biblical thought' (Childs 1970: 133) is taken into account.

But despite these obvious advantages, the holistic approach is not without its difficulties. In the first place, attempts to discover the 'general drift' of Scripture often merely reflect the values, prejudices and presuppositions of the individual interpreter. As Rodd has observed, 'the "thrust" is as much that of the reader as of the writings…[and] the fact that the principles discovered are always such as are acceptable today should immediately suggest that something is wrong' (2001: 322-33). Further, the task of discovering the 'main thrust' of Scripture is not as easy as adherents of this approach would like to believe, for it is not always clear which moral principles are compatible and which are incompatible with the general drift of biblical thought. The case of warfare in the Hebrew Bible provides an interesting case in point, for to argue that the main thrust of Scripture is represented by messages of peace and harmony such as those found in the prophetic literature overlooks the fact that many of these prophecies are infused with the language of war. Thus, for example, in Isa. 11.1-9 the messianic ruler who will come to inaugurate an era of universal peace will 'strike the earth with the rod of his mouth' and will 'kill the wicked' with the breath of his lips (Isa. 11.4b). Similarly, Zechariah looks forward to an age of peace in the land of Judah when old men and women would sit watching children play in the streets (Zech. 8.4-5), but the peace envisaged will only come about when Israel's enemies have been quelled and when the coming king appears in the midst of his people 'triumphant and

victorious' (Zech. 9.9; cf. Rodd 2001: 193-95). The fact is that the Hebrew Bible contains a complex of different and often conflicting messages, and consequently to seek to recover the totality of the Bible's message in order to do justice to its parts is a very tall order.

Despite the merits of the holistic approach, this strategy clearly has its drawbacks, not the least of which is that it tries to achieve the difficult balancing act of recognizing the rich diversity of the ethical principles of the Hebrew Bible on the one hand and upholding the essential unity of biblical thought on the other. In doing so, however, it tends to impose a strained unity on the variegated deposit of material in Scripture.

The Paradigmatic Approach

Adherents of this strategy maintain that the morality of the Hebrew Bible is embedded in certain foundational principles, and it should not be supposed for a moment that its ethical and religious directives must determine our beliefs and practices to the last detail. Rather, it provides us with broad, general principles that guide us in our ethical decision-making, and establishes a standard to which we can appeal in order to justify the correctness of a position taken or to test the propriety of an action performed or contemplated. Such a strategy has sometimes been called the 'paradigmatic' approach to the ethics of the Hebrew Bible (C.J.H. Wright 1983: 40-45; 1995: 57-66; Janzen 1994). In grammatical terms, a paradigm is a verb or noun that is used as a model or example of the way in which countless other words in a language may be formed, and the so-called 'paradigmatic' approach to the ethics of the Hebrew Bible maintains that the laws and narratives that emerged from ancient Israel should be regarded only as a 'model' or 'example' of the type of conduct deemed appropriate or inappropriate. To transpose the provisions of the Hebrew Bible to the modern world and apply them as they stand would severely limit their applicability and would be rather like 'taking the paradigms of a grammar book as the only words one could use in that particular language' (C.J.H. Wright 1983: 43). The point of the grammatical paradigm is that it has to be applied to other words, and the point of the ethical material contained in the Hebrew Bible is that it has to be applied to circumstances other than those to which they were originally addressed. Thus the fact that many biblical laws and customs cannot be viewed as normative or prescriptive as they stand need not be regarded as problematic, for it is not the law or custom *per se* that is to be applied but the essential principles that can be drawn from it. For

example, the institution of animal sacrifice recorded in the Hebrew Bible appears to be completely irrelevant as it stands; yet, the principle that underlies the institution may be entirely applicable in so far as it serves as a reminder of the gravity of sin and the human need for forgiveness (Bright 1967: 148-49). Thus the challenge that readers face as they contemplate the Hebrew Bible is to discover the underlying principles behind the various laws and narratives and to consider how those principles may be applied in the most appropriate ways to the kinds of situations in which they are likely to find themselves. Only by adopting such a strategy, it is argued, can the moral teaching of the Hebrew Bible prove a fruitful source of guidance for our ethical thoughts and actions.

Now it is easy to see how the paradigmatic approach might be deployed to mitigate some of the ethically dubious passages of Scripture. Such passages, it is argued, are problematic only if we adopt an overly literal and restrictive approach to the laws and narratives of the Hebrew Bible; once we learn to root out their objectives and underlying principles, even some of the most morally offensive portions of Scripture may be seen to function as a valuable guide for human conduct. As Kennett long ago observed, once the Hebrew Bible is viewed in its proper perspective, 'it will commonly be found that things which to unintelligent literal interpretation are an occasion for stumbling embody a principle which should be for our spiritual and moral wealth' (1925: 394). Thus, for example, the laws of the Hebrew Bible concerning slavery (Exod. 21.1-11; Deut. 15.12-18) may ostensibly seem to be shameful and reprehensible, but they are not so objectionable once they are understood as provisions designed to uphold the dignity and worth of all human beings, whatever their status. The concept of Israel's special election, often seen as creating the foundation of discrimination against other groups and nations (Plaskow 1990: 96-107), becomes far less problematic once it is understood that the principle underlying God's action was to bring a blessing to the nations of the earth and to reveal to them his redemptive purpose (cf. Gen. 18.18; 22.17-18; 26.4-5).

The attraction of the paradigmatic approach for those concerned to explicate the ethics of the Hebrew Bible is perfectly understandable, for it is a strategy that aims to be true to the spirit of the biblical text while at the same time making it relevant and applicable to the modern world. Even passages that may at first sight appear obsolete or irrelevant are regarded as potentially valuable, for they may contain principles that transcend their culture-bound limitations and that speak all the more tellingly to the needs

of contemporary society. Moreover, the problem of the specificity and historical conditionality of the ethical demands of the Hebrew Bible is conveniently resolved by means of this strategy, for by rooting out the underlying principles of a text we may be able to generalize or universalize its meaning and make it relevant and applicable to various situations in today's world. Viewed in this way, the ethical teaching of the Hebrew Bible may be used in a flexible manner to resolve problems and issues that have no precedent as such in the Bible, and readers are invited to search the Scriptures for signposts pointing them to destinations which were not, perhaps, located on the original map.

Now when the paradigmatic approach is applied to our 'test case' in Josh. 6–11 it is easy to see how the ethical difficulties can be alleviated, at least to some extent. The depiction of Yahweh as a God of war, so often viewed as one of the darker aspects of the teaching of the Hebrew Bible, may not be quite so offensive if seen as an expression of the idea that every aspect of human life—including the political and military realms—are under his ultimate jurisdiction. To speak of God as a warrior was to indicate that he was actively involved in human history both as judge and redeemer (Craigie 1978). Moreover, the basic principle underlying the annihilation of the Canaanites was that pagan rituals and customs could not be allowed to persist side by side with the religion of Israel; the action taken by the Israelites, although drastic, was therefore entirely necessary if the religious life of the nation was to be preserved. It was vital that Israel's faith should remain intact, for it was through his chosen people that God was to bring a blessing to all the nations of the earth. The Canaanites and their wicked practices had to be abolished in order 'to prevent Israel and the rest of the world from being corrupted' (Kaiser 1983: 267-68). Adherents of the 'paradigmatic approach', therefore, insist that the destruction of the native inhabitants of the land of Canaan must not be permitted to overshadow Israel's 'missiological challenge' (C.J.H. Wright 1996: 108), for the point is that the Israelites had to remain completely distinct and exclusive if they were to mediate the knowledge of God to the surrounding nations and bring them into covenantal fellowship with Yahweh.

The difficulty with this approach, however, is that in seeking to eliminate one ethical problem another is immediately created. For example, those who apply this strategy to Josh. 6–11 are forced to concede that, in this instance, the end justifies the means. However, such an argument is highly problematic from an ethical point of view, for even if the indigenous population of Canaan was particularly wicked and depraved (an

assumption by no means shared by all biblical historians) it is doubtful whether this would warrant the destruction of an entire population. Moreover, to seek to justify Israel's annihilation of the Canaanites on the basis that she is to become a vehicle of blessing to other nations overlooks the fact that there are many passages that suggest that Israel was anything but a blessing to the nations with which she came into contact (Clines 1995: 208-209).

The fact is that the paradigmatic approach, however appealing it might ostensibly appear, inevitably raises some uncomfortable questions. How do we know that the derivative moral principles that we cull from Scripture are legitimate within the contours of the paradigm? How do we distinguish between what is an acceptable extension and application of a text and what is not? How do we prevent our derived principles from being merely a subjective statement of our own particular predilections? Will not different people be inclined to draw different—and perhaps even conflicting—principles from the same texts and make the Bible say what they want it to say? The danger of the paradigmatic approach to Scripture is that it invites readers to indulge in a 'hermeneutics of desire' (Ostriker 1997: 165-66) and permits them to draw from the text whatever lesson or message they please. Once the Hebrew Bible is dragged from its literal and historical moorings, it can be made to mean many things, and this particular strategy courts the risk of imposing an arbitrary meaning on the biblical text and throwing open the gates to every conceivable vagary of interpretation. There is also the danger that such a strategy will reduce the ethical teaching of the Hebrew Bible to mere platitudes and vague generalizations with which nobody would wish to disagree. To disregard the plain meaning of the text and discover another more edifying meaning in order to make the Hebrew Bible relevant and palatable seems a strangely disingenuous way of interpreting Scripture, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that by deploying such a strategy we are merely making excuses for not facing up to what the text actually says.

The Reader-Response Approach

In view of the problems that arise with each of the strategies outlined above, it may be useful to consider a different approach, namely, that adopted by reader-response critics in secular literature (Suleiman and Crosman 1980; Tompkins 1980; Freund 1987). Such critics emphasize that readers of literature have a duty to converse and interact with the text, and that literary compositions must be read in an openly critical, rather than in a passively

receptive, way (Iser 1974: 274-94; 1978: 167-72; 1980). Instead of tacitly accepting the standards of judgment established in the text and capitulating uncritically to its demands, they must be prepared to challenge its assumptions, question its insights, and (if necessary) discredit its claims. They may want to resist texts that appear to be oppressive or tyrannical and reject demands that they feel should not (and perhaps cannot) be fulfilled. They may want to argue that the tradition underlying the text is ethically questionable and that to accept it as it stands is both morally and intellectually indefensible. They may want to expose the text's moral inadequacy and inscribe 'COULD DO BETTER' in bold letters on its margin. In brief, they may want to read 'against the grain' of the text and call its content into account in their own court of ethical judgment.

Now such an approach may prove helpful for readers troubled by the ethically problematic passages of Scripture, for such passages are unsettling only because readers have been conditioned to remain slavishly respectful to the text's claims and to respond to its demands with uncritical obeisance. Readers of the Hebrew Bible have traditionally felt themselves to be passive recipients of the text, obliged to submit to its authority and to acquiesce in its value judgments. The type of approach deployed by the secular reader-response critics, however, serves to remind readers that they have a duty to enter into dialogue with the text and to consider the extent to which the views adumbrated by the biblical authors agree or conflict with their own. As they read Scripture, they must respond as thinking individuals and feel free to draw their own conclusions regarding the validity or otherwise of the text's claims. Their task is to engage in a vigorous debate with the Hebrew Bible, resisting statements that appear to be morally objectionable, and taking a critical stance against what they may regard as the excesses of the biblical text. Unlike the canon-within-a-canon approach, which has the effect of ignoring the ethically problematic texts of the Hebrew Bible and thus downgrading them to a position of secondary importance, this strategy recognizes the canonical status of these texts but invites the reader to wrestle with them and to question their presuppositions and ideologies.

Such an approach may well cause a certain unease in scholarly circles, for biblical scholars have generally been reticent to engage in what may be termed 'ethical criticism' (Booth 1988: 3-22); their interest, rather, has been that of the theologian, sociologist or anthropologist, and consequently they have conceived their task as being to describe, as dispassionately as possible, the customs, beliefs and practices of the ancient Israelites. What

they have singularly failed to do is to enter the domain of the moral philosopher and evaluate and critically appraise the biblical statements. It is a curious truism that biblical scholars have generally been quite prepared to question the historical accuracy or reliability of the biblical traditions but have shied away from questioning the validity of its moral norms and underlying assumptions. They have usually proceeded from an examination of the text to an explanation of its meaning without pausing for a moment to pass judgment on its content. As a result, the task of evaluation has all but been evacuated from the realm of biblical criticism. But there must be a place in biblical scholarship—and a respectable and honourable place—for moral critique and ethical appraisal of the biblical tradition. For why should it be regarded as respectable to undertake a critical evaluation of the sources of the Hebrew Bible but not of its morality? Why should the categories of 'truth' and 'falsehood' be so readily applied to the historical statements of the Hebrew Bible but not to its value judgments? It is vital that 'ethical criticism' be placed firmly on the agenda of the university curriculum and that the biblical exegete should be prepared to tackle what may perhaps be the most important task of the biblical interpreter, namely, that of interacting with the text and reflecting consciously and critically upon the validity or otherwise of its claims (cf. Exum 1995 for an example of such an approach).

Of course, the application of reader-response criticism to the Hebrew Bible is not without its problems. In the first place, the transition from the historical-critical to the literary-critical approach is not one that many biblical scholars will find particularly easy or congenial. The interests of literary theorists seem alien to the traditional interests of biblical scholars, and many will probably balk at the importation of a methodology that seems so new and unfamiliar. Yet, such a dramatic shift in perspective may well prove to be the best hope for the future of the discipline, for there are interpretative problems for which the methodologies traditionally deployed no longer seem appropriate and where the application of insights from contemporary literary criticism could yield more satisfactory results (cf. Davies 2003a: 32).

Another problem that arises with the reader-response approach is whether the strategy can justifiably be applied to the Hebrew Bible. Can readers question the normative value of biblical statements without impugning their authority as Scripture? It is our contention that an ethical critique of the Hebrew Bible is not only possible but unavoidable, for even a cursory reading reveals that it exhibits many different—and even

conflicting—moral norms which inevitably require some form of ethical adjudication. One could easily point to texts that appear to condone polygamy or capital punishment and to other texts that appear to oppose such practices. An analysis of the moral teaching of the Hebrew Bible would be comparatively easy if it presented a consistent and coherent system of ethical thought, but the fact is that there are discordant voices within Scripture, and readers are placed in a position where they must often choose between competing claims. Thus, every reader of the Hebrew Bible becomes, of necessity, his or her own ethical critic.

Moreover, an ethical critique of Scripture can be justified on inner-biblical grounds, for the biblical authors themselves frequently exercise a critical role, questioning past beliefs and querying past judgments. Far from accepting passively the values that they had inherited, their strategy was to probe, question, modify and even reject some of their inherited traditions. For example, some recent feminist biblical critics have discovered in the biblical texts a critique of the patriarchal values espoused in much of the biblical literature (Trible 1973; Pardes 1992). Now this dialectical process of criticism and renewal of traditions apparent within the Hebrew Bible may be regarded as providing a seal of approval for an ethical critique of Scripture, for what biblical scholars have termed a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' (Goldingay 1995: 106-14) is encountered within the biblical tradition itself. In brief, the Hebrew Bible comes to us bearing clear traces of its own critique of tradition, and thus provides the contemporary reader with a warrant to dissent from its teachings and to question (and perhaps even reject) some of its ethical injunctions.

Now the biblical passages describing the annihilation of the Canaanites in Josh. 6–11 must surely feature prominently in the list of biblical texts that modern readers of Scripture would wish to question or reject, for the depiction of God encountered in these chapters is seriously defective and the actions attributed to his people are clearly morally offensive. Indeed, the need for an ethical critique of Scripture is nowhere more apparent than in these texts, for it is precisely when such passages go unchallenged that the Bible is in danger of being shamelessly exploited for political and ideological ends (cf. Jones 1999: 192-96). As we contemplate such passages of Scripture we must learn to become 'dissenting readers' (Davies 2003b), and just as we might readily concede that parts of the Hebrew Bible are scientifically or historically wrong, so we must be prepared to pronounce that parts of it are *morally* wrong. It is not enough simply to excise such passages from Scripture, or to relegate them to some inferior

stage of Israel's development, or dismiss them as out of symmetry with the more palatable parts of Israel's faith and ethics. Rather, the morally offensive passages of Scripture, such as Josh. 6–11, must be questioned, critiqued and even rejected in an open, honest and forthright way.

An ethical critique of these chapters can be justified on inner-biblical grounds, for it is arguable that there is a critique of the violence associated with war in the Hebrew Bible itself (Niditch 1993: 134-49; but cf. Rodd 2001: 191-93). Thus, for example, the Chronicler, in recounting the treatment of defeated captives (2 Chron. 28.8-15), highlights God's displeasure with the folly and cruelty of war and commends the merciful clothing and feeding of the prisoners. A similar plea for the fair treatment of prisoners of war is implied in 2 Kgs 6.20-23, and a powerful critique of the intolerable aspects of warring behaviour is encountered in the oracles against foreign nations in Amos 1.3–2.5 (cf. Barton 1980). Thus it is arguable that some of the biblical writers themselves felt uncomfortable with the traditions recounting the cruelties and atrocities of war, and there is a sense in which Scripture itself provides a warrant for modern readers to probe its values, to question its assumptions and to dissent from its teachings.

Conclusion

In this article we have been concerned to examine some of the strategies deployed by biblical scholars over the years to overcome the ethically problematic statements of Scripture. In an attempt to exonerate the Hebrew Bible of some of its more dubious moral pronouncements, a wide variety of approaches have been advocated. However, none of the strategies examined is without its difficulty. Some merely serve to highlight the distance that separates the biblical text from its contemporary readers, while others simply make the text appear irrelevant, outmoded or obsolete. It is argued that the most satisfactory solution is the one that invites the reader to interact with the text and to question or reject propositions that seem blatantly unacceptable or perverse. Instead of ignoring or sidelining biblical passages that appear to be ethically questionable, as adherents of the canon-within-a-canon approach advocate, this strategy faces such passages head-on, inviting the reader to weigh such statements in their own scales of ethical judgment. Such an approach does not derogate from the authority of Scripture; on the contrary, it continues a process encountered within the Hebrew Bible, for the biblical authors themselves often assumed a critical, dissociating position with regard to the traditions that they inherited.

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