Interpreting the Old Testament after Christendom

A Workbook for Christian Imagination

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INTERPRETING THE OLD TESTAMENT AFTER CHRISTENDOM
A Workbook for Christian Imagination

After Christendom Series

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Introduction

1. Interpretation after Christendom

This book is about the challenges and fascinations for Christians of interpreting the Old Testament, or as I prefer to call it, the First Testament. The focus will be on its narrative literature, though its poetry, law, and wisdom also play a part. My aim is to assist readers to encounter the books of the First Testament and discover their relevance, indeed, to hear God's Spirit speaking through them. This is not an armchair book but an aid to study, so readers may wish to have easy access to an open Bible.

There was a time in the United Kingdom when the Bible was familiar to most people because they attended church regularly, where the First Testament was read and preached from. There were references to its characters and stories in art, literature, and music, and its turns of phrase appeared in common parlance ("into the lion's den," etc.). This was the era of Christendom, when most people assumed that Christianity went hand-in-glove with the nation's culture, its politics, and its everyday life. Today some of these things linger, but they are passing out of regular usage.

During the twentieth century there was a steady decline in churchgoing, and a corresponding waning of influence of the churches (both established and non-conformist) in public life. There was growth in adherence to alternative religions, though the majority of the population would seem to have little interest in such things, and some would

subscribe to atheism or agnosticism. In the UK, the formal links between the established church and state remain; daily business in the House of Commons is preceded by prayers, senior bishops of the Church of England sit in the House of Lords by right, the monarch is crowned by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Residents of a Church of England parish have the right to be married in its church building, have their babies baptized there, and to vote at its Annual General Meeting. State schools are supposed to have regular collective worship that is wholly or mainly of a Christian character, according to recent Education Acts, although this is rarely adhered to in practice. These are significant remnants of the past, yet they are often maintained out of tradition, inertia, or desperation rather than conviction.

Many committed Christians long for a time when this process of decline might be reversed, and we might be a "Christian country" once more. It is true that Christian traditions and values have made a significant contribution to British culture, but these were always mixed with a strong dose of Greek and Roman ideas, stories, values, and practices, together with some pagan inheritance. But it is highly questionable whether Britain was ever *truly* Christian, where the challenge of following Jesus was embraced by more than a small minority. In its origins Christianity transcended nationhood and united people across political and ethnic boundaries, since allegiance to Jesus Christ came before any other loyalty (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11, etc.). However, a process of change in Christian attitudes and practices began once Christianity was tolerated by Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 CE and was consolidated when Theodosius banned religions other than Christianity from the Roman Empire in 381.[1] Whenever nations have formally espoused Christianity, whatever laudable motives may have been involved, it has turned into a co-opted religion, with all the iniquities of religiously sanctioned privilege, exclusion of non-conformists, oppression, and violence. There were centuries within British Christendom when certain followers of Jesus were persecuted, or at least socially disadvantaged (Lollards, Puritans, Baptists, Quakers, and Catholics).

Today, other committed Christians have accepted that Christendom lies largely in the past and that it is time to welcome living after Christendom. There are many lessons that can be learned from Christians who

1. For the changes in practices and mindsets that accompanied the inception of Christendom, see the complementary studies by Kreider, *Patient Ferment,* and Howard-Brook, *Empire Baptized*.

lived during Christendom, from those who lived before Christendom began, and from those who have lived in parts of the world that have never experienced it.[2] I will not repeat the helpful historical overview of Bible reading that Lloyd Pietersen provided in his contribution to this series.[3] Like Lloyd, I recognize that Christendom lies in the past, but this book focusses more concertedly on the interpretation of the First Testament.

This chapter sets the scene by considering some of the challenges that these scriptures pose, and then sketches several approaches that have been adopted to interpret them. It considers some aspects of the interpretive approach that I seek to adopt, drawing particular attention to the impact of the long-held assumption that the Christian church has replaced God's ancient people, the Jews, in God's purposes. It closes with an overview of the chapters that follow.

2. First Testament Challenges

Readers often encounter several significant challenges; I will mention four of them.

The First Testament is frequently understood as less important than the Second. In the Protestant tradition, the letters of Paul to the Romans and Galatians have been particularly influential, and their apparently negative comments regarding "the law" have often been taken as reasons for disregarding the Torah (i.e., the Pentateuch) along with the Prophets and the Writings.[4] Judaism has been regarded as a religion of works-righteousness, and thus its scriptures have been viewed with suspicion.[5] The very use of "Old" in contrast to "New" implies that the former is out of date, superseded, and this assumption must be challenged.

Secondly, the First Testament is a large collection of books, containing many different kinds of literature. While the basic storyline can be fairly easily picked out, those who attempt to read through it from the beginning often get stuck in only the third book because Leviticus' detailed

2. For an extensive discussion of Christendom, its end, and what might follow, see Murray, *Post-Christendom*.

3. Pietersen, *Reading the Bible after Christendom*, chapters 2–4.

4. The Hebrew Bible consists of three parts, *Torah* (Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings); together they may be referred to by the acronym *TaNaK*.

5. In Second Testament scholarship, the various "new perspectives" on Paul have seen an important re-evaluation of Paul's attitude to the law, but these have yet to filter into many church teaching programs.

regulations appear tedious. On closer inspection, the way in which God is portrayed in one book turns out to be rather different from the way the same God appears in another. For example, the standards required by this God appear to vary from one book to another; compare the regular construction of altars at various sites by the patriarchs in Genesis chapters 12–35 with the insistence upon one central shrine for worship in Deuteronomy chapter 12. How then can readers make sense of the wealth of material, but also the diversity of voices, and even competing theologies, found in the First Testament?

Thirdly, some parts of the First Testament are very contentious, and it can be tempting to avoid engaging with controversy. The debate continues in many countries about the biblical stories of creation and the scientific theory of evolution. Historians and archaeologists raise important questions about Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan, and some have doubted whether Kings Saul, David, and Solomon even existed. What interpretive perspectives might illuminate these debates, and enable readers to decide wisely concerning such issues?

Fourthly, and perhaps most troublingly, the First Testament contains several ethical challenges that alienate many readers, of which the most obvious are:

- Violence appears central to its main story; indeed, some have alleged that genocide is commanded by God on several occasions. In one of its most famous stories, God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, though stops him at the last moment. If Jesus, as presented in the Second Testament, reveals a God of peace, how can this be reconciled with the violent portrayal of God in the First?
- Women are marginalized throughout the First Testament, and despite some notable exceptions in which women play significant parts, it seems an androcentric collection of books—and it has usually been interpreted that way. So, is it sexist as well as patriarchal?
- Slavery frequently appears in the pages of the First Testament, together with laws that regulate its practice; it appears to have been an institution that God is prepared to tolerate.

It is these ethical difficulties that are currently most challenging. A number of writers who are hostile to Christianity, or to any religious faith, have pointed to such ethical sore points as grounds for rejecting the Bible. Several Christian scholars have responded directly to these challenges, while

others have been aware of the difficulty within their own tradition and sought to nuance their own understanding of scripture. This book cannot provide complete answers to the most challenging intellectual questions and existential challenges faced by those who seek to hear God speaking through the scriptures today, but it is hoped that it makes a constructive contribution to a pressing set of questions.

Whilst it is important to acknowledge the challenges presented by the First Testament, it is essential to give some indication of its many benefits, more of which will be discussed in the course of this book. Whilst the Second Testament discloses more about God than could be known from the First, there is much in the latter to be discovered about God, God's involvement with the world and God's dealings with God's people. Thus, several central topics of belief and behavior are at stake in the following chapters:

- *God:* how may we better understand, know, and respond to our Creator, Redeemer, and Transformer?
- *Ecclesiology:* how do God's people understand themselves in relation to God's mission to the world?
- *Ethics:* how should God's people live in the world today and how might they contribute to wider ethical discussion?
- *Scripture:* how does God communicate through a collection of ancient books to God's people today?

3. Approaches to the Interpretation of the First Testament

The challenges outlined above are complicated by the fact that many different responses to them have been developed by Christians down the centuries, and it will be helpful at this point to provide an overview of some of the interpretive options. I have identified four broad approaches to the interpretation of the First Testament, the first of which is radical rejection. The second approach finds ways round parts of scripture that are difficult to reconcile with each other, while the third faces up to the challenge of such clashing voices. The fourth approach is more conservative, but includes three alternative strategies to the challenge of violence. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, nor is this a comprehensive

survey of such approaches, since that would require a book in itself, but it is intended to provide some orientation to the field.

a. Reject Entirely

This approach was first made by a second-century church leader named Marcion, at a time when no Christian Bible had yet been established. The Greek version of the Jewish scriptures (known as the Septuagint, abbreviated to LXX) was well established in the churches, and various copies of the apostolic writings circulated among them, along with numerous other documents later excluded from the canon. Marcion was born in Pontus, on the Black Sea, the son of a bishop and wealthy ship owner. He went to Rome about 140 CE, became a member of the church there, and gave it a large sum of money. Under the influence of Cerdo, a gnostic[6] teacher, he developed a novel faith, and expounded this to the church leaders, consequently being excommunicated in July 144.[7]

Marcion held that there was a radical dichotomy between the law and the gospel, and he distinguished sharply between the God of the Jewish scriptures (an inferior creator God, or *Demiurge*), and the Supreme God as revealed by Jesus Christ. However, Marcion rejected the twelve apostles as Judaizers who taught a modified Judaism that was offensive to God, believing that only Paul correctly understood the teaching of Jesus. He used Paul selectively to support his view, while rejecting as interpolations those Pauline passages that supported the Jewish scriptures. He deduced from Galatians 1:8–9 that there was only one Gospel book, identifying this as Luke, and rejected the other Gospels as contaminated with Jewish influences. Yet, while Luke was closest to the original Gospel, it too was tainted and required redaction to discard Jewish elements, such as the infancy narrative (1:1—2:52) and genealogy (3:23–38). Marcion was the first person to compile a new collection of scriptures; this consisted of an abridged Gospel of Luke, and ten expurgated letters of Paul (without 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus). It was introduced by his own

6. The word "gnostic" is a catch-all term used to refer to various groups that believed people could be saved from an evil world through the secret teaching of a "revealed knowledge" (*gnosis*) and thereby gain access to the true divine world beyond it, whereas all other humans were trapped in ignorance of that divine world. See Pheme Perkins, "Gnosticism."

7. For details, see Stander, "Marcion."

Antitheses, which justified his criticism of the Jewish scriptures and his formation of this canon, or authorized collection of definitive writings.

Marcion founded his own church with a similar organization and ritual as that of the Roman church, within which his own writings assumed a scripture-like status.[8] Although he died *c.*154, Marcion's movement spread rapidly throughout the Roman empire, flourishing for nearly a century. All the leading patristic writers denounced him, and in the second half of the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem thought it necessary to warn Christians not to enter a Marcionite church by mistake. Marcion was wrong, but are many contemporary Christians effectively following him in their neglect of the First Testament?

b. Employ the Concept of Divine Accommodation

The church fathers were troubled by the obvious differences between the views of God and religious practice between the Testaments. Origen responded to Marcion, Valentinus, and other gnostics by insisting that the way to interpret passages about the violent defeat of enemies, like Joshua 10:20–26, was to apply them to the personal conquest of sin.[9] Such "spiritual" or "allegorical" reading of the First Testament was widespread in the early and medieval church.[10] However, this approach fell out of favor with the Reformers, who took up an alternative approach found in many early theologians, that of divine accommodation.[11] For example, Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390) had argued that God permitted animal sacrifice by Abraham and his descendants as a concession to their limited horizons of understanding and as part of a gradual process of revelation (*Orations* 5.25).

It is interesting that John Calvin, who took divine involvement in war at face value, found ways to discount other things attributed to God in the First Testament. In his *Commentary on Genesis*, he says that the account of the creation of a firmament in the sky to hold back the

8. For discussion of Marcion's limited influence upon the formation of the Christian canon, see McDonald, *Biblical Canon*, 324–33.

9. See the discussion in Earl, *Joshua Delusion*, 8–14, 109–11.

10. See Levy, *Medieval Biblical Interpretation*.

11. See the detailed study of Benin, *Footprints of God.*

waters above it (1:6–8) seemed "opposed to common sense, and quite incredible,"[12] and he later commented on 6:14:

> Moses wrote everywhere in homely style, to suit the capacity of the people. . . . Certainly in the first chapter he did not treat scientifically the stars, as a philosopher would; but he called them in a popular manner, according to their appearance to the uneducated rather than according to the truth.[13]

Furthermore, commenting on Genesis' striking insight into God's response to human wickedness: "the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (6:6), Calvin writes:

> The repentance which is here ascribed to God does not properly belong to him but has reference to our understanding of him. For since we cannot comprehend him as he is, it is necessary that, for our sakes he should, in a certain sense, transform himself. That repentance cannot take place in God easily appears from this single consideration that nothing happens which is by him unexpected or unforeseen. The same reasoning, and remark, applies to what follows, that God was affected by grief. Certainly, God is not sorrowful or sad, but remains forever like himself in his celestial and happy repose: yet, because it could not otherwise be known how great is God's hatred of sin, therefore the Spirit accommodates himself to our capacity.[14]

Calvin's appeal to the concept of accommodation was a traditional way in which Jewish and Christian thinkers expressed the conviction that there were errors in scripture.

Jean Lasserre, a twentieth-century French Reformed theologian who disagreed with Calvin on the question of war,[15] faced up to the significant moral distance between God in the First and Jesus in the Second Testament, and admitted: "I can see only one satisfying answer: the systematic refusal of violence was a personal contribution by Jesus of Nazareth, His

12. Calvin, *Genesis 1*, 32.

13. Calvin, *Genesis 1*, 153.

14. Calvin, *Genesis 1*, 147.

15. "Calvin's fundamental error over the problem of war seems to lie precisely in the fact that he founds his ethic indifferently on the two Testaments, giving the same authority to both." Lasserre, *War and the Gospel*, 59.

original discovery."[16] The novelty of Jesus' insight is underlined by the path of his own career:

> This is part of the crucial misunderstanding between Jesus and His people. His method of non-violence was strange by comparison with the Old Testament, . . . it bewildered His contemporaries and disappointed even his friends and disciples. . . . In the crisis the crowd deserted Him at once because they were ready to use violence and could not see why He still would not use it.[17]

We might add that Jesus appears to have startled his contemporaries in several other ways, such as his unusual respect for women and children. How did Jesus come by such novel attitudes? Lassere makes some brief suggestions but does not explore this question systematically.

Kenton Sparks has recently followed the general approach of accommodation but argued carefully for acknowledging the inconsistencies and moral problems of the First and Second Testaments, by characterizing the Bible as *Sacred Word, Broken Word*. In the same way that God's creation is good yet includes evil, God's written word is good yet includes evil; in each case the flaws should not be blamed on God, but rather on the fallen, sinful state of humanity.[18] Sparks amends the traditional move of divine accommodation in three ways. Firstly, it was formerly thought that the human authors, such as Moses, colluded with the divine accommodation,[19] but Sparks proposes that the accommodation happened between God and the human author, such that God adopted Moses' ancient view of the cosmos. Secondly, accommodation was previously appealed to only at certain points where there appeared a difficulty, but Sparks argues that God adopted the human words and viewpoints of finite, fallen human authors on every page, so that the *entire* Bible is accommodated discourse. Thirdly, Sparks suggests employing the term "providential adoption" rather than "accommodation" since the latter tends to imply that God is active in communicating errant human views, whereas it is more appropriate to think that God honoured the human

16. Lassere, *War and the Gospel*, 62.

17. Lasserre, *War and the Gospel,* 63.

18. Sparks, *Sacred Word*, 47.

19. For example, in Calvin, *Genesis 1*, 79–80, God knew the proper scientific cosmology, *and so did Moses*, but kept it secret! Thus, both God and Moses accommodated to the Israelites' limitations.

wills of the authors, allowing them freedom to be themselves (in all their time- and culture-bound specificity).

> Such a "passive" account of the matter is particularly important in the case of biblical genocide (and similar textual terrors), else we are compelled to say that God participated in human evils to achieve a grander spiritual purpose. A better description in these cases would be that God has canonically adopted human authors as his speakers and that, in doing so, he has permitted these authors—fallen as they were—to write the sorts of things that ancient fallen people would write about their enemies. It is one of the great mysteries of faith that God's redemptive activity is carried out successfully and beautifully through the agency of fallen men and women.[20]

Such an approach means that no particular part of the Bible can be taken as straightforward communication of God's character or will for humanity, but that all must be processed through some theological framework. Sparks suggests that interpreters should attend to three voices beyond scripture's discourse when exercising such theological interpretation, each themselves with biblical grounds and enabled by the Spirit; the cosmos, the tradition, and experience.[21]

A contrasting approach to accommodation has been taken by William Webb and Gordon Oeste in their book *Bloody, Brutal and Barbaric?* They focus on holy war texts that raise ethical questions concerning genocide and war rape, and employ a composite approach to interpretation that Webb had previously developed when dealing with other controversial ethical topics.[22] This combines divine accommodation with "an incremental, redemptive-movement ethic," by which they mean that a redemptive storyline can be discerned through the Bible such that God deals with Israel in gradual steps relative to neighboring nations. From a twenty-first-century reader's perspective, God's war commands may appear barbaric (e.g., Deut 21:10–14), yet when compared with what we know about atrocious war practices in the ancient world they appear significantly restrained. For example, Amos' condemnations of various outrages committed by surrounding nations (Amos 1:2—2:3) imply that Israel would disapprove of rather than celebrate such actions.

20. Sparks, *Sacred Word*, 54–55.

21. Sparks, *Sacred Word*, 118–31.

22. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals* and *Corporal Punishment*.

In addition, Webb and Oeste make a powerful case that the language used about warfare in the First Testament is frequently hyperbolic, as is found generally in ancient Near Eastern battle records. Defending this argument against several more literal interpretations, they refute any notion of genocide in Israel's practice of warfare, and argue that Israel's larger goal was to make the land sacred space for the worship of YHWH.[23] Furthermore, these authors identify a collection of "antiwar or subversive war texts" that present YHWH as an uneasy or highly reluctant war God. For example, YHWH expresses grief over the war sufferings of Israel (e.g., Jer 9:10–11; 17–19), but also over those of other nations (e.g., Isa 15:5; 16:9–11; Jer 48:30–32; 35–36). Again, one feature of warfare in the ancient world was that the victorious king would often build a temple for his god in which the king would boast about his triumph. In contrast, when king David contemplated building a temple for his god, YHWH refused on the grounds that David had "shed much blood and waged great wars" (1 Chr 22:8; cf. 28:3). Further, Israel's temple was decorated with items that evoked the Garden of Eden rather than with depictions of war.

Webb and Oeste conclude from such restraints and reservations that, as well as God's accommodation to the use of warfare in the First Testament, God moves his people towards something better in incremental steps relative to the world around them. They go on to argue that Jesus in the Gospels does not engage in violence and Paul's letters teach a discipleship that is antithetical to violence. Finally, Jesus appears as future apocalyptic warrior, especially in the book of Revelation, but here there are several key differences between his war and conventional war practices. Indeed, the final battle is really no battle at all, since only one warrior fights with one sword, and that sword is in the mouth, not the hand (Rev 19:15). Thus, the Bible's storyline concludes by untangling the ethics of holy war; God will finally enact justice without embedded injustices.

The comparison between Israel's war texts and those from other nations in the ancient Near East succeeds in revealing significant differences, and warrants the claim that Israel's scriptures can be said to reflect certain incremental ethical advances over other societies of that time. However, Webb and Oeste squeeze too many topics into their case for subversive war texts and overplay some prophetic lamentations regarding other nations.[24] While they attend to the shift between war practices before and

23 These two points are summarized at Webb and Oeste, *Bloody, Brutal and Barbaric?* 172 and 249.

24 They refer to lamentations over certain cities without regard to the rhetorical use of this genre as a form of polemic; e.g., Ezek 27:2; 28:12; 32:2 (294).

after the adoption of monarchy, an approach that paid greater attention to changing versions of nationhood though Israel's varying polities would have strengthened their case. Nevertheless, their book demonstrates that the traditional concept of accommodation requires supplementation with further interpretive perspectives if it is to be persuasive.

c. Attend to Diversity within Scripture

Many eminent scholars have pointed to the numerous tensions and even contradictions between various parts of the First Testament; these must be acknowledged rather than denied. In order to hold together these multiple witnesses coherently, the field of biblical theology has developed, and a variety of theological approaches were proposed in the twentieth century, each appealing to different principles of integration, such as covenant (Eichrodt), salvation history (von Rad), the canon (Childs), and election (Preuss).[25]

In his *Theology of the Old Testament,* Walter Brueggemann seeks to do justice to Israel's core testimony concerning YHWH, but also to what he calls its "counter-testimony."[26] Brueggemann explores Israel's core witness in characteristic statements by attending to grammar:

- in verbal sentences—the testimony is to a God who creates, makes promises, delivers, commands, and leads.
- in adjectives—the testimony is articulated normatively at Exodus 34:6–7, "merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . . yet by no means clearing the guilty . . . ."
- in nouns—the testimony employs metaphors of governance (judge, king, warrior, father) and sustenance (artist, healer, gardener, mother, shepherd) that point substantively to God's mercy, love, and power.

This brief outline doesn't do justice to Brueggemann's detailed and subtle discussion of many texts, but it indicates his approach. He then explores Israel's counter-testimony, consisting of Israel's complaints in many

25. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*; von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*; Childs, *Old Testament Theology*; Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*. For an overview of the discipline, see Bartholomew, "Biblical Theology."

26. In chapter 2 of his *Theology,* Brueggemann is sensitive to hermeneutical issues, postmodernity, and Judaism.

psalms about injustice, abandonment, and exile, as well as the questions expressed in Job and Ecclesiastes. These highlight YHWH's hiddenness, his ambiguous character (abusive? contradictory? unreliable?), and capacity for violence ("it belongs to the very fabric of this faith").[27] Brueggemann insists that lived faith moves back and forth from self-abandoning praise to self-regarding complaint, maintaining the tension between Israel's testimony and its counter-testimony.[28]

A rather more programmatic approach has been worked out in detail by Wes Howard-Brook as he traces what he identifies as two competing religious visions throughout the whole Bible, one of "creation" and the other of "empire," with Jesus fulfilling the vision of creation. He calls for people to follow the God of creation and to refuse to cooperate with the destructive forces of contemporary empires.[29]

Approaches that give due weight to the diversity of scripture call for an evaluative approach to interpretation on the part of the reader; they involve decisions as to which parts are more central or crucial than others.

d. Accept without Significant Qualification

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Marcion are those Christians who maintain that the First Testament contains no errors (of fact or morality) in what it teaches. In this approach, it is assumed that intimate divine involvement in the human process of writing guards the text from falsehoods, and especially from misrepresentation of God.[30] The strong appeal to divine inspiration can quickly become a justification of a very literal approach to interpretation, which fails to appreciate the subtlety of its language and discounts the ancient cultures within which it was written; it can flatten the variety of its books and come close to violating the very text that it seeks to honor. Yet there are many careful scholars who are alert to such subtleties of interpretation while holding a "high" view of scripture. They adhere to the authority of the First Testament while accepting some relatively minor qualifications.

27. Brueggemann, *Theology,* 381.
28. Brueggemann, *Theology,* 400.
29. Howard-Brook, *Come Out, My People!*
30. This view finds its basis in texts such as 2 Tim 3:16–17.

Intrinsic to this approach is the view that violence, while a regrettable aspect of the fallen human condition, is something that God is prepared to deal with. Indeed, God perpetrates violence, since it is said that God sent the flood to destroy human beings because of their spoiling of the world (Gen 6:5–8), and subsequently inflicted death by way of just punishment on many occasions; for example, upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:20; 19:24), and upon the Egyptian firstborn (Exod 12:29). When, in response to the latter calamity, the Pharaoh permitted the people of Israel to depart from Egypt, and then changed his mind and pursued them, YHWH defeated his chariots at the Red Sea and was celebrated as a great warrior (Exod 15:1–18).

Exactly how to interpret these and later instances of divine violence has been taken in several different ways, of which I will consider three.

(i) God's use of violence is morally justified

The most offensive of such divine activity is YHWH's instruction, given through Moses, to "utterly destroy" (*ḥerem*) the inhabitants of Canaan in order that they might occupy this land, which God had promised them (Deut 7:1–6, 17–26; 20:16–18). Joshua later carries out this command at Jericho, Ai, and other cities (Josh 6:16–21; 8:18–29; 10:28–43; 11:6–23). At first glance, this utter destruction appears barbaric so that it has been condemned as genocide.[31] The killing of men, women, and children seems purely for the benefit of the chosen people. However, a closer look shows that there is a moral reason for God's instruction. This is first found in YHWH's promise to Abraham; "Know this for certain, that your offspring . . . shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen 15:13–16). Thus the Israelites would only take possession of the promised land once the Amorites (one Canaanite tribe standing for them all) were ripe for judgment.[32] When Moses charges the Israelites to dispossess the current occupiers of the land, it is on account of their wickedness (Deut 9:4–5), which included child sacrifice (Deut 12:31) and various other transgressions (Lev 18; 20), and had the potential to corrupt the Israelites. In these

31. See the discussion in Copan & Flanagan, *Genocide?* chapter 1.

32. Indeed, Abraham's grandson, Jacob, rebuked his sons Simeon and Levi for their violent attack on the Canaanite city of Shechem (Gen 34:25–30; cf. 49:5–7).

ways God's command to wipe out the inhabitants of Canaan is taken as not arbitrary, but morally justified.

Yet, the reader cannot help wondering if the whole population deserved extermination, especially women and children—the use of "wickedness" as justification for mass slaughter finds echoes in genocidal activity down the centuries. A closer look reveals that the language of "blotting out" is modified somewhat to "driving out," and a process of gradual takeover is envisaged in several places (Exod 23:23–33; Num 33:51–56), even "little by little" (Deut 7:20–23), so that it can be argued that many inhabitants would have fled before Israel's army rather than been annihilated.[33]

Once settled in the land, the Israelites themselves were subject to divine punishment for their infidelity to YHWH on many occasions, often in the form of military defeat and oppressive outsider rule, and eventually were dispossessed of the land—and the suffering involved was borne by their women and children as well as by men. Thus, it can be argued that YHWH judged Israel according to the same standards, and by the same means, that had been applied to the land's previous inhabitants.

Such is the general interpretation of violence in the First Testament maintained by many Christians who stand within the Reformed traditions that are traced back to John Calvin and Martin Luther, behind whom stands the hugely influential theologian Augustine of Hippo. They uphold the ethical stance known as "just war," arguing that the Second Testament does not dispense with God's use of violence when the cause is just. They can point to God's judgment taking place when God's Spirit strikes down Ananias and Sapphira following their lie about the extent of their giving to the church, or when Paul, through the Spirit, strikes the magician Elymas blind (Acts 5:1–11; 13:6–12). Indeed, Paul uses very strong language about those who teach a false gospel (Gal 1:8–9; 5:12). Certain passages on the lips of Jesus portray a future divine judgment in which some will be condemned to hell (Matt 23:33; Mark 9:47), and saints, apostles, and prophets are exhorted to rejoice because God has pronounced violent judgment on Babylon, i.e., Rome (Rev 18:20–21).

33. Copan & Flannagan, *Genocide?* 76–83. Note that these authors make a concession here to the Bible's use of categorical language in certain places, that can be modified elsewhere.

(ii) God's violence is morally justified, but the role of human violence is diminished

Within the rather different "peace church" tradition, Jesus' teaching and career are interpreted as rejecting violence, both for himself and his followers.[34] The question this raises is whether Jesus definitively revealed God's character as non-violent, or revealed God's strategy to save a world in which human violence simply breeds more violence. In the latter case, it could be argued that God alone might employ violence justly in order to restrain or punish evil. Such is the view of two Mennonite scholars who sought to justify God's right to inflict violence, while distinguishing this from the human use of violence.

Millard Lind argued that the definitive character of warfare on Israel's part was that YHWH fought for his people. Supremely at the Red Sea, the people saw YHWH fight for them, while they simply had to stand still (Exod 14–15). On a number of other significant occasions, although Israelites were involved in the fighting, the key intervention came from YHWH; the battle of Jericho (Josh 6), Joshua's defeat of the Amorites at Gibeon (Josh 10), Barak's battle with the Canaanites at Mt Tabor, celebrated in Deborah's Song (Judg 4–5), Gideon's defeat of the Midianites (Judg 7), Samuel's defeat of the Philistines (1 Sam 7). It was this conviction that David expressed to Goliath before their single combat: "the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's and he will give you into our hand" (1 Sam 17:47).[35] Such conviction was eroded by the introduction of the monarchy and its development of a standing army. Here Lind made an important observation concerning the link between holy war and political structure:

> The central issue of Israel's self-understanding therefore was Yahweh's relation to history through Torah and prophetic word, as brought into tension with Near Eastern myth where the gods were related to history through the coercive structures of kingship law and military power.[36]

Yet the prophets continued to challenge the kings to rely on YHWH for salvation rather than on political alliances, especially in Isaiah's challenge

34. An influential twentieth-century advocate of this view was Trocmé, *Nonviolent Revolution*.

35. Similar convictions are found in some psalms, e.g., Pss 33:16–17; 46:1–11; 147:10.

36. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior*, 33.

to king Ahaz (Isa 7:1–17), and in his word to Hezekiah, following which the Assyrian host was destroyed outside Jerusalem (2 Kgs 19). The insistence of later prophets that YHWH fought against his own people through the agency of other nations showed that the biblical writers' concern with regard to warfare "was not merely another nationalism, but a profound moral conviction."[37]

John Howard Yoder insisted on reading the First Testament with respect for its own time and culture, rather than judging it according to contemporary moral norms. He built on Lind's work (at that time unpublished) to argue that what matters in understanding Israel's warfare is not its relation to the forbidding of killing in the Ten Commandments or to some theory of just war (which was developed centuries later), but Israel's trust in YHWH to deliver them from annihilation without military power or alliances. Over a long time, Israel's self-understanding as a people transitioned from a state with a homeland and monarchy, a geographical and ethnic nation, to a faithful remnant in exile without a king or temple. The prophets even developed a vision of YHWH's concern for all peoples (e.g., Isa 19:23–25; Amos 9:7) and future peace between nations and creatures (e.g., Isa 2:2–4; 11:6–9). Thus, within the First Testament itself there is a movement towards the vision of peace that is fully embodied in Jesus' teaching and career.[38] John Nugent has written a compilation and critical assessment of Yoder's many essays on the interpretation of the First Testament. He identifies Yoder's conviction that social ethics cannot be separated from ecclesiology:

> The Old Testament . . . establishes a much-needed canonical trajectory within which to interpret New Testament passages regarding the relation of God's people to the state, the nature of the powers and principalities, the meaning and role for suffering servanthood, the nature of God's reign, and what it means to live as aliens and exiles.[39]

As much as these two theologians point to nonviolence on the part of Jesus' followers, they assign violence to God. When in the early chapters of the Bible God commits himself to ongoing involvement with humanity and the world, with all its violence and injustice, it seems inevitable that

37. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior*, 33.

38. Yoder, "If Abraham Is Our Father," in *Original Revolution*, 85–104. See also "God Will Fight for Us" in *Politics of Jesus*, 76–88.

39. Nugent, *Politics of Yahweh*, 188.

the strategy of committing Godself to one particular family and nation would entail the use of violence.

(iii) The Crucified Christ provides the key to divine violence in the First Testament

Gregory Boyd has written a major work that seeks to interpret the violent portrait of God in the First Testament by appeal to the crucified Christ, and followed this with a shorter, popular version.[40] Boyd begins with classic commitment to Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of God. He insists that Jesus reveals a God who is love, rejecting Augustine's definition of love as an inner attitude rather than outward behavior, which allowed Augustine to condone the imprisonment, torture, and execution of Christians that he viewed as heretics.[41] In the Second Testament, love is known by Jesus' outward behavior, his laying down of his life for us; the cross is the supreme revelation of God's love. Jesus' incarnation and ministry anticipates and culminates in the crucifixion, while his teaching about God's kingdom calls for non-violence and enemy-love on the part of his disciples. Jesus' resurrection signals God's vindication of Jesus' way of life, and thus demonstrates that the cross is both the power and the wisdom of God.[42]

Secondly, Boyd argues that, although there are glimpses in the First Testament of God as revealed by Jesus Christ, in many places we find a "fallen, culturally conditioned, ugly conception of God."[43] In such places God accommodated to the distorted understanding of God that was held by the characters and authors of the time. In that God permitted Godself to be depicted in these clouded, ill-conceived ways, they testify to God's humility, God's willingness to engage with human beings even though their grasp of God's character was imperfect. Boyd holds that when God is represented in terms that contradict what is later revealed about God in Jesus, God is stooping "to allow the sin and cultural conditioning of his

40. Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God,* and *Cross Vision.*

41. Argued in detail in *Crucifixion*, vol. 1 chapter 4.

42. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 38–46.

43. Boyd, *Cross Vision,* 54, instancing Jer 13:14.

people to *act upon him* as he bears the sin of his people."[44] Thus he calls these violent divine portraits "literary crucifixes."[45]

Thirdly, Boyd works in detail to clarify portrayals of God's involvement in judgment within the First Testament. Divine judgment is often understood as God's active involvement in visiting suffering on people or nations, but Boyd advocates an Aikido-style judgment. Aikido is a nonviolent school of martial arts in which practitioners, rather than use their own aggressive force, turn the actions of opponents back on the aggressors, who thus end up punishing themselves. When Jesus speaks about the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44; Matt 23:36–38) it is with grief rather than out of vengeance. Thus God longs to protect people from the destructive fall-out of their sinful choices, but when they insist on going their own way, he "hands them over" to suffer the consequences.[46]

Next, Boyd distinguishes between judicial and organic forms of punishment, i.e., between punishment that is externally imposed and that in which consequences are in-built. He asserts that, "With the exception of its violent portraits of God, the Bible always describes God's judgments in terms of divine abandonment."[47] He maintains that the relationship between sin and punishment in the First Testament is organic, instancing Psalm 7:12–16, which employs standard divine warrior imagery, but sees such judgment worked out in natural self-destructive consequences.[48] Further, Boyd claims that

> whether they are crediting or blaming God when they depict him in violent ways, the very narratives in which they do this almost always contain indications that confirm that the violence they ascribe to God was actually carried out by other agents. And even when their own narratives don't provide such confirmations, other aspects of the biblical narratives do.[49]

He finds evidence of this in the account of the death of the firstborn in Egypt, which begins with YHWH's speech to Moses determining to kill

44. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 59.

45. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 54 and following.

46. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 140ff. Boyd finds confirmation of this even in some places in the First Testament; Jer 48:31; Mic 1:8; Hos 4:17; 11:8.

47. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 149

48. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 153.

49. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 163.

the firstborn people and animals (Exod 12:12), then has Moses inform the elders about the same, yet modifying it such that YHWH "would not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down" (Exod 12:23). Thus, YHWH's judgment actually took the form of refraining from preventing "the destroyer" from carrying out its desire, a point later emphasized in Hebrews 11:28.

Boyd is to be commended for addressing head-on this complex and disturbing aspect of biblical interpretation that confronts those who are convinced that "the myth of redemptive violence" must be resisted.[50] Several of his affirmations are welcome and well argued:

- The central importance of the cross in Jesus' revelation of God's character as not intrinsically violent.
- God relates to human beings in non-coercive ways.
- God's judgment as Aikido-like, and punishment as organic rather than judicial.
- The significance of evil powers, and their involvement in organic judgment.

However, there are serious flaws in his proposal, not least that he fails to define violence.[51]

Boyd's "Cruciform Hermeneutic" makes the cross central to his reading of the First Testament. At one point he explains that the cross typifies the self-sacrificial love of Jesus' whole career,[52] yet he tends to abbreviate this to Jesus' death, giving the impression that it is uniquely salvific. And although he is critical of the version of penal substitutionary atonement that sees God the Father venting his wrath on Jesus so that he would not need to vent his wrath on other human beings, he fails to explain his own understanding of the cross in atonement. Boyd emphasizes the discontinuities between the First and Second Testaments, calling the former a "shadow" revelation.[53] In particular, he denigrates the law as presented in the First Testament.[54] In *Cross Vision* there is little sense

50. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 138.

51. A task well done by Paynter, *God of Violence Yesterday*, chapter 2.

52. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 138.

53. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 25, appealing to Col 2:16–17 and Heb 10:1.

54. Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 27, thinks that John 1:17 contrasts the law given through Moses with the grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ. On this, see chapter 2 below.

of vitally important elements of the First Testament; its peace vision, its critique of empires, injustice, and militarism. Most seriously, Boyd commits himself to the concept of biblical infallibility, yet he treats the violent portraits of God found in the First Testament as misrepresenting God's true nature. As Helen Paynter says,

> If we follow Boyd's argument to its ultimate conclusion, we can trust nothing that the Old Testament says unless and until it is validated by the New Testament. In other words there is no authentic, reliable revelation of God prior to the coming of Jesus Christ.[55]

Despite Boyd's appeal to divine accommodation, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the depiction of God's character in the passages concerned *is* fallible according to Boyd's interpretation. For this reason, his view stands on the edge of those who accept the First Testament without "significant qualifications."

4. The Art of Interpretation

Given the foregoing, an explanation of the approach taken by this book is appropriate. I should point out that none of the following details are intended to displace prayers for the illumination of the Holy Spirit and openness to learn from other people, both within the church and without. It may sometimes be convenient to divide life up into compartments such as its physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions, but all aspects of life interact with each other and cannot be separated out without significant loss. Here I need to touch briefly on the specialist subject of hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation.

Hermeneutics takes account of how people read, understand, and make use of texts, especially those written in a different era or culture from our own. The idea that there are "rules" for the interpretation of texts has a long history, going back to rabbinic traditions, but since Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century and Gadamer in the later twentieth century, the notion emerged that hermeneutics was an art rather than a science; it is a practice that must be learned. This was due to their realization of the significance of the readers or communities that read or hear the text, and their role in the whole process of understanding it. Furthermore, hermeneutics "includes the second-order discipline of

55. Paynter, "Review," 3.

asking critically *what exactly we are doing when we read, understand, or apply* texts."[56]

Hermeneutics involves recognizing the assumptions one brings to any text as a reader—the influences of family, education, culture—books read, media absorbed, time and attention spent on particular interests, etc. When it comes to reading the Bible, hermeneutics includes reflection on sermons heard, Bible aids read, conversations had, and so on. But it is also about recognizing one's social location; I am a privileged, "white," English male who grew up in an evangelical Christian home and has lived through the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. We can become more hermeneutically aware by acknowledging such influences and the assumptions they contain, by discovering their origins and pathways, by realizing their weaknesses and prejudices as well as their strengths, and by exploring alternatives—unfamiliar and challenging, but often surprisingly illuminating.

Hermeneutics also involves recognizing the assumptions embedded in the texts we are reading—the times and cultures within which they were written—the influences upon their authors, collectors, and transmitters—and their intended audiences. We can become more hermeneutically aware of the scriptures by studying ancient languages, histories, and cultures, and realizing the subtle differences between those ancient worlds and our own, as well as the remarkable similarities.

These two aspects of hermeneutics cannot be isolated from each other, since growing awareness of the one is aided by familiarization with the other. Thus, Gadamer wrote of "the hermeneutical circle," though some recent writers prefer the use of "hermeneutical spiral" since this better reflects development over time with growing familiarization.[57]

Sensitivity to hermeneutical factors can be developed by studying how the Bible has been interpreted before, during, and after Christendom, but this is too large a subject to do it justice here. So, I have decided to sketch one of the most significant stumbling blocks for many Christians reading the First Testament, the axiomatic assumption that Christians have replaced, or superseded the Jews as God's chosen people, known as *supersessionism*.

56. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics*, 4.

57. See Thiselton, *Hermeneutics,* 159.

Supersessionism in the Early Church

The roots of supersessionism lie in the so-called "parting of the ways" between the early Christian church and developing Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Some scholars have thought that this parting had already happened by around 135 (after the Bar-Kochba revolt), while others have made the case for a more prolonged process.[58] But the model of parting ways has been seriously questioned.[59] The early Christian churches had much in common with Jewish practice and literature: weekly gatherings for prayer, regular fast days, their liturgical rites such as baptism and eucharist had their roots in Judaism, and especially reading the Jewish scriptures in the Septuagint. However, some early Christian writings, such as the Epistle of Barnabas and the epistles of Ignatius, warned against Judaizing, and during the second-century Christian apologists developed what is now known as the *Adversos Judaeos* tradition. This began with Justin Martyr, whose position has been summarized by Kendall Soulen like this;

> God's history with the carnal community of the Jews is merely a passing episode within God's more encompassing purposes for creation, which are universal and spiritual in nature. As the Hebrew Scriptures themselves testify, Christ is the climax of God's spiritual purposes for creation. Christ therefore ends God's transient relationship with Abraham's physical descendants, and initiates God's enduring relationship with the church, the spiritual community of salvation. Henceforth, the God of Israel is to be found with "the true, spiritual Israel."[60]

A generation after Justin, Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul, wrote his great work, *Against Heresies*, combatting gnosticism and asserting the identity of genuine Christianity. By this time the apostolic writings had been largely accepted alongside the ancient Jewish scriptures in a two-fold canon approximating to what we know today as the Christian Bible. Irenaeus insisted that the unity of this two-fold canon was found in the "rule of faith" (*regula fidei*), a brief summary statement of Christian

58. Dunn argued for the earlier date in *Parting of the Ways*. However, Boyarin has argued that the parting did not take place until the fourth century; see his *Border Lines,* and "Rethinking Jewish Christianity."

59. Becker and Reed, *Ways That Never Parted*.

60. Soulen, *God of Israel*, 37.

belief, derived from the apostles.[61] In order to counter Marcion, Valentinus, and other gnostic writers of the time, Irenaeus concentrated on Genesis 1–3, but then effectively jumped straight to the Gospels and Paul. Irenaeus established a way of reading the scriptures that was so influential in the church that Israel's story is entirely missing from the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.[62] Soulen's verdict is that "Justin Martyr and especially Irenaeus bequeathed to the church a canonical narrative of extraordinary scope and power. . . . Unfortunately, however, the Irenaean solution to the unity of the canon is deeply flawed."[63]

In his *Pascal Homily* (c.180 CE), Melito of Sardis accused the Jewish people of deicide. A long tradition of Christian invective against the Jews unfolded, heavily influenced by the rhetorical practices of the time. Tertullian vigorously combatted Marcion's position using a simple strategy; wherever Marcion had located a conflict between the law and the gospel, Tertullian diverted criticism away from the Jewish God and Jewish texts and onto the behaviors, practices, sins, and disasters of the Jews themselves (*Against Marcion*) and undermined Judaism (*Against the Jews*). According to Origen, the Jews' greatest sin of all time was their killing of Jesus, after which God had abandoned them entirely (*Apology* 26.3). Cyprian of Carthage compiled an influential anthology of proof texts to aid preachers, showing among other things, that "the Jews, as foretold, have departed from God and lost his favour . . . while the Christians have succeeded to their place" (*To Quirinius* 1.5).

Scott Bader-Saye has argued that

> the church's relation to Israel and to the Gentile powers affected and was affected by the developing view of election as a private and spiritual matter and by the theological argument with the Jews concerning the visibility and presence of Christ's redemption.[64]

As the centuries passed and the second coming of Jesus was delayed, Christians had to deal with a genuine challenge from Jews: "Where is this redemption that you say has occurred in Jesus Christ?" The Romans still ruled over Jerusalem, the Jews were still scattered, and violence continued to triumph over peace. Suddenly in the fourth century a new

61. Tertullian and Origen did likewise in the early third century.

62. The creeds contain nothing about the ministry and teachings of Jesus either!

63. Soulen, *God of Israel*, 48–49.

64. Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel*, 52.

response to the Jews' question became possible in the light of Constantine's reign; a messianic redemption was present and visible! Eusebius' *Oration in Honor of Constantine on the Thirtieth Anniversary of His Reign* interpreted the extension of Constantine's rule as a reflection of Daniel's and Isaiah's messianic visions, and linked Christ's redemptive reign to the authority of Rome. He thereby surrendered the Jewish character of redemption to the realities of empire—it came with the sword rather than the ploughshare. Rosemary Radford Ruether comments on this way of understanding redemption:

> In the period after the establishment of the Church as the religion of the Roman Empire, this argument, that the gentile Church is a messianic fulfilment, takes on a new political tone. The universalism of the nations, gathered in the Church, is equated with the universal sway of the Christian Roman Pax. The ecumenical empire comes to be identified with the millennial reign of the messiah over the earth. . . . All nations gather into the Kingdom of Christ. The Jews alone are in exile "among their enemies." But since their enemies, the nations, now equal the elect gentile Church, the reversal of Jewish messianic hope is total. All nations are redeemed at the coming of the Messiah except the Jews![65]

As the fourth century went on, hostility to Jewish-Christian congregations grew. It is clear that many ordinary Christians were attracted to observe Jewish festivals, and sometimes took part in them, and this concerned some church leaders. John Chrysostom preached a series of defamatory sermons in Antioch, *Against Judaizing Christians* (386–87), warning the faithful against such participation.[66]

There was one Christian leader who shifted what had become the traditional invective against the Jew, Augustine of Hippo. Paula Fredricksen has shown how Augustine developed a nuanced position that amounted to a defence of the Jews, which proved influential for centuries. Indeed, on the eve of the Second Crusade in 1146, Bernard of Clairvaux preached against those who were inciting Christians in the Rhine Valley to use violence against Jews, by appeal to Psalm 59:12, "Slay them not, lest my people forget." This was a text that Augustine had employed in his argument that the Jews, alone of all the religious minorities within

65. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 141, quoted in Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel,* 59.

66. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews*.

the Christian state, should be tolerated (*City of God* 18.46).[67] Augustine wrote most extensively about the Jews in an anti-Manichaean work, *Against Faustus* (398–*c.*400), in which he developed a novel allegory from the story of Cain and Abel; Abel is a figure of Christ, while Cain is a figure of the Jews. Abel is killed by Cain, his older brother; so also Christ, the head of the younger people (i.e., the gentile Christians) is "killed by the elder people, the Jews" (12.9). God has placed upon the Jewish people the "mark of Cain" so that they should not be killed (12.12–13). Despite the originality of Augustine's usage of the biblical story and his position defending the Jews from murder, the allegory of Cain still condemned them to a cursed and wandering existence. Augustine developed his interpretation of Psalm 59:12 while composing sermons on the book of Psalms (perhaps between 410 and 415); the Jews must not be killed because they perform an essential service for the church in preserving the scriptures.[68] None of this prevented Augustine from repeating traditional condemnations or from producing a *Sermon Against the Jews*, in which he rebuked the Jews for their continuing exile and for their witless service to the church (7.9).[69] When Augustine later made his appeal to Psalm 59:12 in *City of God*, the allegory of Cain for the Jews dropped out; this was because the story of Cain's building a city (Gen 4:17) was essential to Augustine's construct of the two cities that shapes his magnum opus.[70]

The great historian of the Christian tradition Jaroslav Pelikan reviewed the appropriation of the scriptures by the early Christian apologists and theologians in this way:

> Virtually every major Christian writer of the first five centuries either composed a treatise in opposition to Judaism or made this issue a dominant theme in a treatise devoted to a different subject. . . . They no longer looked upon the Jewish community as a continuing participant in the holy history that had produced the church. They no longer gave serious consideration to the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament or to the Jewish background to the New. Therefore the urgency and the poignancy about the mystery of Israel that are so vivid in the New Testament have appeared only occasionally in Christian thought, as in some passages in Augustine; but these are outweighed, even in Augustine,

67. Fredricksen, *Augustine,* xi–xii.
68. Fredricksen, *Augustine,* 324.
69. Fredricksen, *Augustine,* 324.
70. Fredricksen, *Augustine,* 346.

> by the many others that speak of Judaism and paganism almost as though they were equally alien to the "people of God"—the church of Gentile Christians.[71]

Glimpses of Supersessionism within Christendom

Besides the mistreatment of the Jews, supersessionism entailed other racist evils. Willie James Jennings explores the outworking of supersessionist assumptions together with emerging capitalism in his profound work, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. Because the central place of the Jewish people in God's purposes had been replaced by the Christian church, which had tied itself to the Roman Empire, and then to particular European states, it became axiomatic to think of "white" Europeans as racially superior to those of darker skins. Jennings establishes this point by exploring the detailed account of the allocation of slaves at the port of Lagos in 1444 written by Zurara, the Portuguese royal chronicler of Henry the Navigator.[72] Jennings goes on to discuss the writings of José Acosta, the Spanish Jesuit theologian working in Peru (1570–83), whose achievement was to embed colonialist attitudes within Western theology.[73]

The great English hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674–1748) sought to aid biblical literacy and wanted to enhance the worship life of Christians in particular by a Christian rendering of the Psalms in the common vernacular. Despite his dissenting commitments, some of his hymns became standards in Anglican hymnbooks down to recent times.[74] However, Jennings shows how Watts' versions of the Psalms, produced at the time when the British Empire was beginning to take shape, embedded a reading strategy in service of *nationalist* imagination. Most significantly, he substituted the name of Britain for the nations of Israel and Judah, British kings for Israelite ones, and Second Testament themes for some "dark sayings of David."[75] Jennings instances Psalm 47, the last verse of which Watts rendered:

71. Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 15, 21.

72. Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 15–64.

73. Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 65–116.

74. E.g., "When I survey the wondrous cross;" "Joy to the world;" "O God, our help in ages past."

75. Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 211.

The British islands are the Lord's,
  There Abraham's God is known;
While powers and princes, shields and swords,
  Submit before his throne.[76]

Watts' metrical psalms connect the Christian narrative, not only with the opening up of God's election of Israel to the election of the whole world, but also assume that the Lord has claimed the British Isles and its people as his own. Jennings' conclusion is insightful;

> This is indeed a form of Israel replacement, but it captures one of the most crucial forms of replacement. The multiple biblical stories of ancient Israel's quest for land center on God. The possibility of Israel's sovereignty pivots on the divine will. God stands always between Israel and the land, Israel and its land. If land is absolutely crucial to the identity of a people, then God stood always "in the way," as it were, between Israel and its desire for land, reordering its identity first in relation to the divine word and then to the land. Israel's stories of land gained, lost, and regained disclosed the God of Israel as the creator who "owns" all land and therefore claimed all peoples. Israel's God is indeed "the King of the whole earth" (Ps 47:7). The revelation of the Creator in and through Israel is the first and foremost point of connection between Israel and all the other peoples.
>
> Watts positions Great Britain at this crucial point of revelation, turning Israel's sojourn with God into Britain's journey. He thereby destroys the trajectory of connection between Israel and the other nations. Israel simply models a connection between God and a nation. . . . Israel was the beginning point, the ethnic *arche* of a process of instantiations of a people living in communion with God. Their imperfect reality in both knowledge of and communion with God was more clearly grasped in Britain.[77]

In this reading of the First Testament, Israel simply modelled a connection between God and a nation; the trajectory connecting the people of Israel and all the other nations (through Jesus) was destroyed.[78]

There was a parallel story in the United States. Eran Shalev has charted the dominance of the Hebraic political imagination between the founding of the Republic and the Civil War.

76. Quoted in Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 212.

77. Jennings, *Christian Imagination,* 213, 215.

78. Jennings, *Christian Imagination,* 275–94, discusses commonalities in the experience of Jews and "black" people at the hands of "whites."

> The idea of America as a new Israel, founded on a Calvinist ethos that was not narrowly denominational but inclined towards the Old Testament, originated in an insular seventeenth-century outlook that singled out New England as a "chosen nation." It reverberated and expanded with the onset of the Revolution throughout the colonies-turned states as Americans repeatedly heard that they were "at present the People of Israel," or were establishing "our Israel." This image of an American people chosen for a special destiny was to remain a mainstay of American self-fashioning and the negotiation of nationhood for years.[79]

Shalev goes on to show that American thinkers of the time attempted to transcend traditional figurative exegesis; they were not simply appealing to a metaphorical Israel but presented America's very identity as a latter-day Israel. This did not stop them appealing also to other historical models, such as republican Rome, especially after 1789. However, following the Civil War, "Old Testamentism" was replaced by New Testament ideology as a result of the Great Awakening, while it was the slave community that claimed the exodus and Moses as their own.

After the Shoah

Between 1941 and 1945 Hitler's "Final Solution" succeeded in exterminating nearly six million Jews. This vile Nazi project has frequently been called "the Holocaust," but for Jews themselves this title carries overtones of wholly burnt sacrifice, as in the LXX version of Leviticus 6:16 (6:23 in NRSV and other versions). Thus "the Holocaust" carries the connotation that the attempt to eradicate the Jewish race amounted to some sort of religious devotion. This is revolting and unacceptable, so instead the Jews prefer the term "Shoah," which may be translated "catastrophe."

The horrors of the Shoah have confronted European civilization with its long history of anti-Semitism, and Christian churches have begun to realize their complicity with this history. Protestant churches have engaged in significant reflection upon the legacy of anti-Semitism within their own institutions, and in meaningful dialogue with Jews.[80] Especially since the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), there has been a growth in

79. Shalev, *American Zion*, 1.

80. E.g., a conference on "Mennonites and the Holocaust" was held at Bethel College in 2018.

official dialogue between the Catholic Church and Jews, and at Mainz in 1980 Pope John Paul II made a significant statement;

> The first aspect of this dialogue, namely the meeting between the people of God of the old covenant, which has never been revoked by God (Rom 11:29), and the people of God of the new covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our church between the first and second parts of the Bible.[81]

The Catholic First Testament scholar Norbert Lohfink responded to this statement with a short book exploring the many biblical texts on the subject of the covenant, old and new. Lohfink points out significant differences in the way "covenant" is used in both Testaments; for example, in Paul's thinking expressed in Galatians 3, "Christians belong not to a 'new covenant' but to the 'Abraham covenant' which precedes and overarches the law of Sinai."[82] Taking Jeremiah's rhetoric into account in his prophecy of a new covenant (31:31–34), "the new covenant is but the earlier one, now brilliant and radiant."[83] Reflecting on the mistreatment of Jews in Christendom, Lohfink makes this provocative suggestion:

> Paul could not have known that it would come to such a darkening of the faith of the nations. Has not the situation which he describes in Rom 9–11 been reversed? Those who believe in Jesus as God's messiah have forgotten what God's gift looks like and what they are called to. They must be urged to recognize anew "the Jewishness in Christianity" . . . because perhaps today Jews are in many ways more aware of the "covenant" than Christians, . . . perhaps present day Jews are more aware that God will change the world, and so needs a "people," a society, which in contrast to other societies in the world tries to live according to God's original design for the world.[84]

Since the Second World War, the realization that for much of its existence the Christian church has assumed that Christianity replaced the Jews in God's purposes, that the church superseded Judaism, and that Jews are fair game for persecution, has been acknowledged by leading Christian theologians,[85] but it has yet to penetrate into the teaching and

81. Quoted in Lohfink, *Covenant*, 5.
82. Lohfink, *Covenant,* 30.
83. Lohfink, *Covenant,* 48.
84. Lohfink, *Covenant,* 80f.
85. Particularly Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann

practices of many churches. We should attend to Jewish scripture scholars, like Marvin Sweeney, who have engaged in "Holocaust" theology.[86] Contemporary Jewish communicators, such as Simon Schama and Jonathan Sacks, have much to teach us about loving God after Christendom.[87]

5. Overview and Scope

Part I deals with two essential topics that set the course for the rest of the book. Chapter 2 explores some of the ways in which the scriptures were essential to Jesus and to his earliest followers who wrote the Second Testament. It has been included because its focus upon figural interpretation illuminates the way in which the First Testament feeds forward to aid interpretation of the Second. Chapter 3 makes the case for interpreting the First Testament book by book, exploring three interpretative perspectives; literary, historical, and theological, and using the book of Genesis as an example. These chapters introduce some scholarly methods of interpretation, so some readers may find them challenging and prefer to skip over them, perhaps returning to them later.

Because the First Testament is so large, it is tempting to make sweeping generalizations, and to avoid awkward details that do not conform to them. So in Part II four books are considered in some detail, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, because together these tell a major part of Israel's story and contain some of the most ethically challenging materials.[88] A prelude introduces scholarly approaches to these books.

The drawback of this strategy is that books in which other genres are dominant (legal materials in Exodus–Deuteronomy, prophetic oracles in the Latter Prophets, poetry in the Psalms, wisdom genres in other parts of the Writings) require somewhat different approaches and cannot be

86. Sweeney, *After the Shoah*.

87. See especially Schama's BBC TV series, *The Story of the Jews*. He has published two out of three books so far on *The Story of the Jews*. Sacks' series of books of weekly readings of the Jewish Bible, *Covenant & Conversation*, are full of insight.

88. 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings will be treated as two integrated books. Evidence from the Qumran scrolls shows that in each case the original Hebrew was a single book. Once they had been translated into Greek (LXX), their sheer length was the likely reason for division into four volumes (called 1, 2, 3, and 4 Reigns/Kingdoms). The Latin Vulgate edition divided them in the fourth century CE, but a similar division was not made in Hebrew Bibles until the late Middle Ages. While convenience may be an understandable reason for division, the whole book is required for adequate interpretation.

discussed in detail. Some of these do receive limited attention at the start of Part III, as chapter 8 considers how the various books of the First Testament work together with each other and proposes that "conversation" is a helpful model for their interrelation. Chapter 9 investigates how the First Testament story and books might be reframed in the light of Jesus by considering two theological approaches; narrative and canonical. Finally, some aspects of facilitating access to the First Testament are explored in chapter 10, and it is here that implications of the After Christendom perspective become more evident. This is a cumulative workbook that explores several aspects of the subject, but it pays off in the end!

It might be thought that a book such as this should deal with the topic of law, given what Paul says about the law in Romans and Galatians. Whilst this is an important aspect of Christian interpretation of the First Testament, I would argue that it must be set in the wider context of Israel's narrative traditions for two reasons:

- The biblical laws are given by God to the recently liberated Israelites in order that they might form a society without the injustice and oppression that they had endured in Egypt, and point to their saviour, YHWH (see Deut 4:5–8). These laws were adjusted as time went by and circumstances changed.[89] Therefore, law must be interpreted within its narrative and canonical context.
- One of the ethical limitations of laws is that they identify transgressions and stipulate penalties but cannot model the ethical goals that benefit a society; they provide an ethical *minimum*, not a maximum. Gordon Wenham has argued that the First Testament narrative texts seek "to instil both theological truths and ethical ideals into their readers."[90] Therefore laws are not the only, or even the most important, contribution to ethics; they must be understood in relation to their narrative and canonical context.[91]

This book addresses narrative and canonical aspects of interpretation; interpretation of First Testament law in light of the Second Testament is vital but must be discussed on another occasion.

89. Compare the laws in Deuteronomy to those in the "Book of the Law" in Exod 20–23.

90. Wenham, *Story as Torah*, 3

91. Brown explores the relation between the biblical story of creation and moral character in *Ethos of the Cosmos*.