

The Old Testament and Other Religions

Participants in the Crossings Conference received a handout listing only the biblical passages. I have included now in red notes that were the basis of my presentation that accompanied the handout.

Conditioning factors in this conversation:

Mission in the 20th-21st century has emphasized dialogue, listening to the other, as necessary attitudes as we bear witness to what we have seen and heard.

Violence and hate in our country; violence today in Central African Republic

I think of the different approaches of two of my own great teachers.

- G. Ernest Wright *The Old Testament against its Environment*. Caricature of Baalism.
- Thorkild Jacobsen The holy = *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the mystery that causes us to tremble and that fascinates us).
- *Christian Century* (and how did that turn out?) or *Interfaith Century*

I. Unhelpful Items about other religions in the Old Testament

Example I

³ Do not **intermarry** with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of Yahweh would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

⁵ But this is how you must deal with them: **break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire.** Deut 7:3-5

In our time—one of the items our marrying couples often have not considered well is the implication of their faith commitments, or lack of them, for their marital relationship. In Jewish-Christian marriages rabbis lament that the Jewish partner often ceases to practice Judaism. As we think about these difficult passages, we need to remind ourselves that the OT of course is a full part of the Christian Bible.

Example II

¹⁶ But as for the towns of these peoples that Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must **not let anything that breathes remain alive.** ¹⁷ You shall annihilate them-- the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites-- **just as Yahweh your God has commanded,** ¹⁸ so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods (what sorts of misunderstandings of Canaanite religion are hinted at here?), and you thus sin against Yahweh your God. Deut 20:16-18

Many biblical scholars doubt that Israel ever actually followed this terrible custom. What is terrible is not only the custom, but the fact that Yahweh commanded it.

Example III

¹² If you hear it said about one of the towns that Yahweh your God is giving you to live in,

¹³ that scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, "Let us go and worship **other gods**," whom you have not known, ¹⁴ then you shall **inquire** and make a thorough investigation. If the charge is established that such an abhorrent thing has been done among you, ¹⁵ **you shall put the inhabitants of that town to the sword, utterly destroying it** (herem and everything in it—even putting its **livestock** to the sword. ¹⁶ All of its spoil you shall gather into its public square; then burn the town and all its spoil with fire, **as a whole burnt offering to Yahweh your God**. It shall remain a **perpetual ruin, never to be rebuilt**. ¹⁷ Do not let anything devoted to destruction stick to your hand, so that Yahweh may **turn from his fierce anger** and show you compassion, and in his compassion multiply you, as he swore to your ancestors, ¹⁸ **if** you obey the voice of Yahweh your God by keeping all his commandments that I am commanding you today, doing what is right in the sight of Yahweh your God. Deut 13:12-18

Example IV

¹⁹ Moreover, Josiah (the great reformer) removed all the shrines of the high places that were in the towns of Samaria, which kings of Israel had made, provoking Yahweh to anger (a century after the Northern Kingdom had been destroyed); he did to them just as he had done at Bethel. ²⁰ He slaughtered on the altars **all the priests of the high places** who were there, and **burned human bones on them**. Then he returned to Jerusalem. 2 Kgs 23:19-20

The violent acts of Josiah against the priests are followed five verses later by this high praise:

²⁵ Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him. (2Kgs 23:25)

Example V

Note the unsympathetic and deliberate distortion of non Israelite religion in the following passage. Compare the distortion of Judaism in medieval Christianity, or the distortion of Islam in popular culture today.

¹⁴ He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵ Then it can be used as fuel. **Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it.** ¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat (cooks burgers), eats it and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!" ¹⁷ The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Save me, for you are my god!" ¹⁸ They

do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. ¹⁹ No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"

²⁰ He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?" warm oneself—cook or bake—make the rest into an idol (an image of a god does not create a god; Second Isaiah was locked in a struggle against the popular culture and religion of Babylon which surrounded the people) Isa 44:14-20

At their best, other religions did not worship the idols themselves, but the deities they represented, which were thought to be present through the idols. Still, the prophet denounces the absurd possibility that access to God can be captured in an object or artifact made by human hands.

Summation about unhelpful texts:

- We should not minimize the threat Israel felt from intermarriage or falling under the sway of the majority culture.
- We find the violence against other religions and their religious officials reprehensible, especially since it is often commanded by Yahweh. Did Yahweh command these things or did the religious officials say that he did?
- We find the depiction of the religion of the other often biased, even a caricature. Little attempt to understand the other.

II. Helpful items about other religions in the Old Testament

Example I

The first commandment: You shall not have other gods before me.

Ambiguity about the word before. Does it mean in preference to me, or does it mean in my presence, that is in my temple. Or does it mean against my face, that is in defiance of me. The Decalogue deals with monolatry rather than with Monotheism. As Luther pointed out, anything you fear, love, and trust above anything else is your God. The existence of other gods is not denied.

Example II

Jephthah to the Ammonite king

Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not be the ones to possess everything that Yahweh our God has conquered for our benefit? Judg 11:24

Jephthah has an argument over land with the king of the Ammonites. Technically speaking Chemosh was the God of Moab rather than of Ammon. But the land under dispute was considered to be under Chemosh's control. A note in the Harper Collins study Bible says: Early Israel supposed that the gods of other people's really existed.

Example III

¹⁷ Then Naaman said, "If not, (that is, if you will accept an honorarium) please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except Yahweh. Is Yahweh limited to the land of Israel:

¹⁸ But may Yahweh pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon (thunderer, an epithet of the Syrian god Hadad), when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may Yahweh pardon your servant on this one count."

¹⁹ [Elisha] said to him, "Go in peace." 2Kgs 5:17-19

A little Israelite servant girl had been taken captive by Naaman and worked for Naaman's wife. He was afflicted with a skin disease, probably not Hanson's disease. The girl said: If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria, he would cure him. The King of Syria sent Naaman to Israel with a cover letter. The King of Israel thought he was being set up. He is trying to pick a quarrel with me. He tore his clothes. Elisha sent a message, why did you tear your clothes? Let him come to me. Naaman goes to Elisha's house and the prophet treats him coldly and tells him to go wash in the Jordan 7x. Naaman goes off in a huff. His soldiers say: If the prophet had asked you to do something difficult you would have done it, what would it hurt to do something simple? He is cured. Naaman offers big honorarium to Elisha. Elisha emphatically refuses the honorarium twice. Elijah and Elisha belonged to the "Yahweh alone party." See the contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah killed all of the prophets by the Wadi Kishon. Hence Elisha's tacit permission for Naaman to compromise himself is astonishing.

Example IV

³ No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh,

⁴ because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. Deut 23:2-4

Gen 19:30-38 Ammonites and Moabites are incestuous bastards.

The Book of Ruth offers acceptance to Ruth who was a Moabite (despite what the law said), and she is recognized as the great grandmother of David. Is the book of Ruth propaganda for David, or is it a protest against the harsh policies of Ezra and Nehemiah against intermarriage? See Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 10.

Ruth is included in the genealogy of Jesus along with Tamar the Canaanite, Rahab the harlot, and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. All these women are foreigners. Several of them are of dubious sexual behavior.

The book of Ruth calls the concerns of Deut 23:3-5 into question.

Example V Jonah

⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and **each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them.** Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was **fast asleep.** ⁶ The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

Each of the sailors prayed, while Jonah was fast asleep..

⁷ The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, **and the lot fell on Jonah.** ⁸ Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

⁹ "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven, **who made the sea and the dry land.**" ¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of Yahweh, because he had told them so.

¹¹ Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; **for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.**" ¹³ Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. ¹⁴ **Then they cried out to Yahweh, "Please, Yahweh, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, Yahweh, have done as it pleased you."** ¹⁵ So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ **Then the men feared Yahweh even more, and they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows.**

After his five word sermon to Nineveh was so successful.

³ And now, Yahweh, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And Yahweh said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" ⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶ Yahweh **God appointed a bush**, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, **God appointed a worm** that attacked the bush, so that it withered.

⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ Then Yahweh said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, **that great city**, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left (talk about being criminally dumb), and also many animals?" Jon 4:3-11

The book ends with a question. Did Jonah answer yes. Or is the question really addressed to the reader?

Justice = Jonah; mercy God's treatment of Ninevites

Repentance is for outsiders and compassion is for God

Jonah does not want to preach to hated Nineveh and is disappointed when Nineveh repents

Particularism = Jonah's resistance to his call. Universalism = God's treatment of sailors and Ninevites.

Jonah was jealous that God's special love for Israel was here being extended to those he considered Israel's enemies.

Jonah was committed to a God of strict justice and was scandalized by God's compassion for those he considered to be wicked and due for severe punishment.

Example VI

⁶ I am Yahweh, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as **a covenant to the people**,
a light to the nations,

Alternate translation:

I am Yahweh, I have called you for a saving purpose,
I take you by the hand and will protect you,
And make you the mediator of my covenant with the peoples,
A light to the nations.

⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness. Isa 42:6-7

Does this refer to literal or metaphorical blindness?

Summary of helpful words about other religions in the OT

- There are passages that concede the existence of other gods (first commandment; Jephthah)
- And passages that recognize the limitations of hardline positions (Naaman and Elisha; Ruth and the Moabite condemnation; Jonah (justice vs mercy). These passages establish a climate of mutual respect and dialogue and humility of the believer over against other religions.
- Second Isaiah's vocational understanding of Israel's and our need of bringing light to the nations by telling what we have seen and heard, and by seeking justice for all of God's people change an academic conversation about religion into an invitation, even an imperative, to go and tell, and let God sort out what God will do with those who are not Christian.

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