

Is God a Violent God?

Conceptions of God in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Karl William Weyde

B. 1947. Dr. theol. Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo.

Karl.W.Weyde@mf.no

ABSTRACT

Does monotheism lead to violence? The article argues that the HB/OT gives different answers. There seems to be such a connection in some of the conquest narratives. However, the laws on war in Deuteronomy introduce more human aspects of warfare, and in Chronicles there is a decline of so-called holy war incidents. God punished only when a nation exceeded its mandate or Israel worshipped other gods. The post-exilic prophets lay emphasis on peace and reconciliation between all peoples, including their worshipping the only God, YHWH, who is holy, just and faithful, the redeemer and saviour of all peoples. Thus, monotheism also leads to salvation and redemption.

Keywords

monotheism, a violent God, the laws on war, the only God: holy and just, saviour and redeemer

SAMMENDRAG

Fører monoteismen i GT til at Gud er voldelig? Enkelte av eroblingsfortellingene kan tyde på en slik sammenheng. Krigslovene i Deuteronomium er imidlertid mer nyanserte og setter grenser for voldsbruk med guddommelig sanksjon. I Krønikebøkene er den såkalte helligkrigen på retur. Gud straffet bare når en nasjon gikk ut over sitt mandat, eller når Israel dyrket andre guder. De etter-eksilske profetene legger vekt på fred og forsoning mellom folkene inkludert tilbedelse av den eneste Gud, JHWH, som er hellig, rettferdig og trofast,

og frelser og forløser for alle folk. Monoteismen innebærer også at JHWH er den eneste som kan frelse og gjøre fri.

Nøkkelord

monoteisme, en voldelig Gud, krigslovene, den eneste Gud: hellig og rettferdig, frelser og frigjør

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that many actions of terrorism in our time are carried out in the name of God.¹ Such tragedies have a religious motivation saying that God accepts violence to promote his interests. To a large extent, the massacre in Norway on 22 July 2011 was also based on religion. In Anders Behring Breivik's Manifesto (which covers 1507 pages) there are as many as 62 explicit references to the Bible, most of which to the Old Testament. In this Manifesto, Bible texts are used by means of a cut-and-paste method to legitimize war against those whom the terrorist regards as the enemies of western civilization: Muslims and multiculturalism.²

I MONOTHEISM AND VIOLENCE: IS THERE A CONNECTION?

In this situation of increasing terrorism and fatal use of the Bible, academics around the world discuss the relationship between religion and violent actions. Among Bible scholars too, especially in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament field, there has been—and still is—a heated debate on this issue, especially after the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, in several recent studies, has argued that there may be a link between monotheistic language and violence in the Bible. Assmann asks the question why violent language is so often used in the Bible to describe events in the history of the Israelite people: How can it be, he asks, that there are so many instances of violence sanctioned by God in the Holy Scripture? Is it due to the sharp contrast between the one true God and all other false gods, a contrast that also included a *political* distinction between friend and enemy, so that peoples other than Israel became God's enemies? And did such theological distinction legitimize violence against enemies both inside and outside Israel? In short, is such violence a likely consequence of monotheism?³

1. The article is based on the author's farewell lecture at MF Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo, 22 May 2017.
2. Anders Behring Breivik, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, <https://publicintelligence.net/anders-behring-breiviks-complete-manifesto-2083-a-european-declaration-of-independence/>, 28.7.2011. Breivik comments on Bible texts especially in the chapter "Christian justification of the struggle," pp. 1325–34. Texts from the Bible form an important part of his argumentation.
3. Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); idem, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (München: Carl

The answer is yes, according to Assmann, who contends that both killing and dying for God are the extreme consequences of the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me (or besides) me” (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7).⁴ But he correctly adds that the language of violence is not restricted to ancient Israel and did not originate there; it came, among others, from Assyrian ideology, which required absolute loyalty of the vassals to the king of Assyria.⁵ Other scholars have also emphasized the importance and legitimacy of military violence, which is documented in ancient Near Eastern texts.⁶

Assmann’s points of view created a harsh debate on the subject he is dealing with.⁷ Assmann himself, in his later works, seems to be more nuanced than he was earlier and he emphasizes now that violence is not a necessary consequence of monotheism; the language of violence belongs to the political field and is the rhetoric of fundamentalists, who make use of religious terms in order to gain support from the masses, and thus misuse such terminology.⁸ But I would like to add that it is most problematic if violent language in the Bible texts colours the conceptions of God in religious communities, where the Bible is the foundation of their doctrines and ethics. And it becomes even more problematic—and dangerous—if, for instance, the biblical conquest accounts are given authoritative, normative value for programs of action and are used to legitimize nationalist ideological projects, as in the case of Breivik, or other cruelties inflicted by fanatics upon others.⁹

The fundamental problem raised by Assmann is a hermeneutical one, which means that the Bible texts must be interpreted in their literary context and also, as far as possible, in their historical context, which implies knowledge of their cultural and religious contexts. This has also been emphasized by several of Assmann’s critics.¹⁰

Hanser, 2003); English translation: *The Price of Monotheism* (trans. R. Savage; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); idem, *Monotheismus und die Sprache der Gewalt* (Wiener Vorlesungen im Rathaus 116; Wien: Picus, 2006).

4. Bible quotations in this article are from NRSV.

5. Assmann, *Monotheismus*, 27–32.

6. See, for instance, Carly C. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History* (BZAW 407; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 5–11, 15–32, 79–80, 96, 115–16, 193–95, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110223521>.

7. See, among others, Rainer Albertz, “Monotheism and Violence: How to Handle a Dangerous Biblical Tradition,” in *The Land of Israel in Bible, History, and Theology: Studies in Honour of Ed Noort* (ed. J. van Ruiten and J. C. de Vos; VTSup 124; Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2009), 373–87, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004175150.i-474.134>. See further below.

8. Assmann, *Monotheismus* [see n. 3], 55–57.

9. For a survey of modern examples of such use and misuse of the conquest narratives, see Rannfrid I. Thelle, “The Biblical Conquest Account and Its Modern Hermeneutical Challenges,” *Studia Theologica* 61 (2007): 61–81 (72–78), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393380701300452>.

10. See, for instance, Erich Zenger, “Gewalt als Preis der Wahrheit?,” in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt: Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie 18.–22. September 2005 in Berlin* (ed. F. Schweitzer; Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie 29; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 35–57; Eckart Otto, “Zwischen Imperialismus und Friedensoption: Religiöse Legitimationen politischen Handelns in der orientalischen und okzidentalen Antike,” in Schweitzer, *Religion, Politik und Gewalt*, 220–66; Kirsten Nielsen, “Imago Dei and the Many Images of God: A Contribution to the Debate on the Relation between Monotheism and Violence,” in *Shaping Culture: A Festschrift in Honor of Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson on his Sixtieth Birthday 28.4.2012* (ed. K. Ólason et al.; Reykjavík: The Icelandic Literary Society, 2012), 321–35.

Assmann's views provide the point of departure for this paper. In some cases, Assmann seems to be right, but I will argue that biblical texts, and some of those that seem to present a violent God, reveal rather complex conceptions of God.

Recently, also Rainer Albertz asked the question, whether Israel's monotheistic belief had necessarily violent consequences; he compared his observations on the OT texts with materials in other ancient Near Eastern religions, and paid special attention to the origin of Israelite monotheism, to violent counteractions to syncretistic extensions of the YHWH religion, and to the breakthrough of monotheism.¹¹ We will take a somewhat different approach by comparing the conquest narratives in the books of Joshua and Judges with the laws on war in Deuteronomy, which provide regulations of the ethics of war. Then we will try to show how the idea of divine war declined in the history writings, and how the prophets later developed the idea of monotheism, which ended in their hope of a peaceful co-existence between Israel and the nations worshipping the one God, YHWH.

Beginning with the conquest narratives we apply the definition of violence given by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary saying it is "the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy."¹²

2 DIVINE VIOLENCE AND EXTERMINATION OF THE NATIONS: THE CONQUEST NARRATIVES

The conquest of the so-called "Promised Land" is known as one of the most famous events described in the Hebrew Bible, and it has inspired liberation movements throughout history. In its *literary* context it is part of the history of the Israelites, and it connects God to violence, one would say even to atrocities. God commands the Israelites under Joshua's leadership to attack certain cities and exterminate their population. The book of Judges relates similar cruel actions, saying that YHWH was with the people and gave the land into their hand (Judg 1:2, 19).

The clearest examples of complete destruction sanctioned by God seem to be the conquests of Jericho and Ai. God promises to give the Israelites these cities, and on Joshua's command they first capture Jericho, destroy *all the inhabitants*, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. It's almost ironic that Joshua spared only one, the prostitute Rahab with her family, who earlier hid the two Israelite spies (Josh 6:20–21, 22–25). And when the Israelites entered Ai, they set it on fire and slaughtered *all the inhabitants* until the very last had fallen by the (edge of the) sword. Twelve thousand, both men and women fell that day and the Israelites hanged the king of Ai on a tree (Josh 8:24–29). In other words, in both cases there was a war of extermination, on God's command; God even instructed Joshua in the tactics of warfare. It is incontestable that in these incidents God is linked to violence. Moreover, later we read that God also gave the five kings of the Amorites and several kings in the northern hill country over to the Israelites – all of them:

11. Albertz, "Monotheism and Violence," 374–85.

12. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/violence>.

“They struck them down, until they had left no one remaining” (Josh 10–11, quotation 11:8). Certainly, God is the driving force in all these cruelties.

Interpretations of Some Ethical Problems

It should not come as a surprise that already the ancient rabbis dealt with the ethical aspects of such massacres. The problem included the fact that Joshua conquered a land that was already occupied by other peoples. Some rabbis explained this by maintaining that God had designated the land for the children of Israel and that the Canaanites were only acting as caretakers of the land until their arrival, but that they refused to give away the land (Sipra 7:9). This explanation, however, does not solve the ethical problem and Jewish tradition in antiquity also presents a more *human Joshua*, by emphasizing that Joshua always gave the inhabitants of a city an alternative, either a chance to go, or to make peace, or to make war (Rabbah Deut 5:14; Rabbah Lev 17:6). Furthermore, there are diverse images in the rabbinic descriptions of Joshua, but nevertheless some overarching features are apparent; first and foremost, that he was a lawmaker and a Torah scholar, and also one who obeyed the law (Josh 23–24).

However, a closer look at some of the texts in the book of Joshua may lead to somewhat more nuanced views of the conquest narratives. K. Lawson Younger, Jr. has, for instance, argued that Josh 9–12, when read in the light of other ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts, do not necessarily refer to a permanent or complete conquest of the land; in most instances the conquest was temporary and did not mean the complete subjugation of the land. This is also clear from a statement such as “you are old and advanced in years, and very much of the land still remains to be possessed” (Josh 13:1), which comes as a surprise after the information given in Josh 11:23: “So Joshua took the whole land [...] and gave it for an inheritance to Israel.”¹³

A second argument having been put forward by Lawson G. Stone is that there are some ethical and apologetic tendencies in the book of Joshua, which can be ascribed to its redaction: To the tradents of the Joshua materials, the holy war traditions in their earliest form represented an unusable past and the tradents therefore guided the readers to interpret the Jericho and Ai narratives in the light of the literary contexts in chapters 2–5 and 9–11. They construed the military campaigns after the Ai incident (Josh 8) as defensive reactions: the Israelites had to destroy the southern and northern coalitions exclusively as the result of the Canaanites responding aggressively to Israel’s presence in the land; only Jericho and Ai were directly attacked by Israel. The information that “there was not a town that made peace with the Israelites, except the Hivites who lived in Gibeon” (Josh 11:19; cf. chap. 9)¹⁴ comes close to suggesting that that war would not have been necessary had the Canaanites been more cooperative. But they resisted the action of YHWH and thus perished, YHWH had hardened their hearts so that they came against Israel in battle and therefore they were

13. K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (JSOTSup 98; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 197–266 (232–37, 243–47).

14. The NRSV reads: “the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon.”

exterminated (Josh 11:20). These Canaanites are thus depicted in analogy with Pharaoh and the Egyptians of the past, and the Israelites are not described as a war machine blazing over Canaan, but are (only) reacting to the Canaanite kings' opposition to YHWH.

Who were responsible for this presentation of the conquest? Stone contends that very little in these chapters can be attributed to the Deuteronomists; it was only *later* that the deuteronomistic redaction turned the structure of divine act and human response into a summons for Israel faithfully to obey God's written Torah, and there are three "undisputed deuteronomistic additions" that illustrate this move: First, Josh 1:1–9, which emphasizes obedience to the law; second, Josh 8:30–35, which relates the reading of the law as the climax of the conquest of Jericho and Ai, and third, Josh 23, which introduces explicit concern for the written law into the conclusion of the settlement. Thus, the Deuteronomists appropriated the conquest traditions by advancing a piety based on the law; they made these traditions become "a paradigm of obedience to the written Torah" and transformed them into "a gigantic metaphor for the religious life."¹⁵

Both theories presented above illustrate some of the historical and ideological problems that arise in the interpretation of the conquest narratives.¹⁶ They also indicate that different approaches to the texts may offer different interpretations.¹⁷ The last-mentioned theory above, especially, may provide some intriguing suggestions to solve the ethical problems in the conquest narratives.

However, the fundamental question still remains unanswered: How could YHWH be such a violent, aggressive God *in some of these campaigns*, where a total extermination is commanded? One should ask whether the Deuteronomists have more to say about the matter than suggested by Stone. The fact that they appropriated the conquest narratives by advancing obedience to the law is perhaps significant and raises the question whether the laws in Deuteronomy, which reflect the theological concerns of those historians, have more to say on war ethics. Do the laws on war in Deuteronomy reflect some *criticism* of the conquest narratives in Joshua and Judges? This issue is our next point.

3 A CHANGE OF WAR ETHICS: THE LAWS ON WAR IN DEUTERONOMY

Two passages seem to indicate an innovation of war ethics in Deuteronomy. First, in Deuteronomy 20 we find the idea that some legal principles should govern warfare. The law commands, "When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you in

15. See Lawson G. Stone, "Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies in the Redaction of the Book of Joshua," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991): 25–36 (31–36; quotations on pp. 35, 36).

16. For a survey of recent research on the book of Joshua, see Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Book of Joshua in Recent Research," *Currents in Biblical Research* 15 (2017): 270–88, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993x16661918>.

17. On different reading strategies used by scholars who attempt to come to terms with ethical problematic passages in the HB/OT, see the survey by Eryl W. Davies, "The Morally Dubious Passages of the Hebrew Bible: An Examination of Some Proposed Solutions," *Currents in Biblical Research* 3 (2005): 197–228, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476993x05052431>.

forced labour” (vv. 10–11). Only if it did not submit peacefully, but made war, the Israelites should besiege it, and when God gave it into their hand, they should put all its males to the sword (vv. 12–13), whereas the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil, they should spare and take as their booty. This is how they should treat all the towns that were very far away from them; distant towns that were not towns of the peoples in Canaan were given a chance to survive (vv. 14–15). Moreover, if the Israelites besieged a town for a *long* time, they should not cut down trees that produced food to the besieging army (vv. 19–20).

Thus, the legislation in Deuteronomy presents *human correctives* of earlier warfare practices including the idea of utter destruction of the enemy (the so-called *kherem*); by requiring humane treatment of enemy populations Deuteronomy 20 seeks to limit the practice of total war as it is described, for instance, in 2 Kgs 3:19, 25.

The law makes a distinction between towns far away and towns of the peoples that God would give them as their inheritance; only the latter should be annihilated, so that the Israelites would not start worshiping their gods (Deut 20:15–18). A similar command to completely exterminate the indigenous population of Canaan also occurs in Deut 7:1–6, 16 (cf. vv. 20–24); the order of the six-nation list in 20:17 is the same as that of the seven-item list in 7:1. Thus, in Deuteronomy 20:10–15, 19–20 a concern for the non-Israelites living far away stands next to the idea of total extermination of the peoples of Canaan (vv. 16–18). Deut 7 holds the same harsh view of the latter. How can these different viewpoints be explained? We mention some answers in recent research.

Interpretations of the Laws on War

(1) The Israelites were allowed to exterminate foreign peoples only if they worshiped other gods (Deut 20:18), and this allowance was *limited* to the conquest of the land in the early history. Deut 9:4–5 demonstrates this connection between idolatry and extermination; the passage says that God dispossessed the nations of their land because of their *wickedness* (*rish'ah*). “Wickedness” is a religious term denoting disobedience to YHWH, which provokes YHWH to wrath (Deut 9:22, 27); therefore, he gave the land to the Israelites. Thus, it was the threat to the belief in YHWH that legitimized such violent actions against the inhabitants of the land.¹⁸

(2) Another, widespread view is that Deut 20:15–18 (in which v. 15 forms a bridge between the preceding and the following verses) is a secondary insertion, which interrupts the connection between two thematically related passages, since verses 19–20 urge leaving intact the very infrastructure that is the goal of the campaign expressed in verses 10–14. Why were verses 15–18 inserted later? Richard D. Nelson contends that this passage is not about past conquest, but about *present* internal threats to Israel’s self-identity and authentic religion; the peoples once conquered were resurrected to represent contemporary alien

18. This was emphasized by Walter Groß, “Keine ‘Heiligen Kriege’ in Israel: Zur Rolle Jhwh’s in Kriegsdarstellungen der Bücher Jos bis 2Kön.,” in *Krieg und Christentum: Religiöse Gewalttheorien in der Kriegserfahrung des Westens* (ed. A. Holzem; Krieg in der Geschichte 50; Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2009), 107–27 (120–23).

cult practices and non-Yahwistic temptations “right here”; this policy of annihilation was driven by reasons of religious purity, not of military logic, and refers to present menaces, such as the situation described in Deut 13:13–19 [ET 12–18]. The baneful influence of these alien peoples of the past survived to infect Israel’s later generations; these peoples of the past stand for contemporary Israelite apostasy, which must be eliminated.¹⁹ A well-known incident that may reflect such threat in post-exilic times is described in Ezra 9 (cf. Neh 13:23–27). Timo Veijola, who made a detailed literary-critical analysis of Deut 7:1–26, suggests a similar late, probably post-exilic date of what he assumed to be the latest layers in that chapter.²⁰

(3) Arie Versluis, too, in his recently published monograph on Deuteronomy 7, points at the similarities between the messages of Deuteronomy 7 and 20; he emphasizes that in both chapters the motivation for Israel’s special attitude toward the Canaanite peoples is religious in nature; there was the danger that Israel would take over Canaanite practices and serve their gods; the (threatened) identity of Israel was at stake and therefore they were instructed to destroy the nations of Canaan.²¹ However, Versluis argues for the unity of these chapters and contends that their message goes back to a tradition that is older than the seventh century BCE, although a precise dating is impossible. He does not exclude the possibility of a formulation in later times, or a message for exilic or post-exilic generations as well.²²

One should note that total extermination is not only directed against other peoples but *also strikes Israel*, the chosen people, when they turn away from *their* God (Deut 13). If this happens, God will treat his people in the same way as he punishes other nations who exceed their mandate.²³ This view of apostasy and its consequences is in agreement with that in the book of Judges relating that when the people abandoned YHWH and worshiped other gods, YHWH gave them over to their enemies and did not hand the nations over to Joshua (Judg 2:11–23).

It has been argued that the Israelites went to war—and should go to war—only for the sake of survival and in situations when their belief in God, and thus their identity, was threatened by other nations or groups.²⁴ Only such cases permitted extermination with divine sanction. Therefore, the idea of war and extermination in these laws should not be interpreted as a *carte blanche* for any people to go to war, not even for the Israelites.²⁵ The

19. Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 245–52.

20. Timo Veijola, *Das fünfte Buch Mose: Deuteronomium; Kapitel 1,1–16,17* (ATD 8.1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 195–96, 198.

21. Arie Versluis, *The Command to Exterminate the Canaanites: Deuteronomy 7* (OTS 71; Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2017), 36–45, 84, 137–38, 169–74, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004341319>. Examining the semantic value of the verb *kherem*, he concludes that it means “kill, exterminate”; thus Deuteronomy 7, where this verb occurs in verse 2 (cf. v. 26) is about destruction, not expulsion (pp. 136–37).

22. Versluis, *Command*, 319–20.

23. This point was correctly emphasized by Assmann, *Monotheismus* [see n. 3], 25–27.

24. Cf. Hans-Peter Müller, “Krieg und Gewalt im antiken Israel,” in *Krieg und Gewalt in den Weltreligionen* (ed. A.T. Khoury et al.; Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 2003), 11–23.

25. See Groß, “Keine ‘Heiligen Kriege’” [see n. 18], 120–23; Jan Christian Gertz, “Regulierung von Gewalt in Gesellschaft und Politik im Alten Testament,” in Schweitzer, *Religion, Politik und Gewalt* [see n. 10], 310–23 (316–23).

texts present a nuanced picture of God, whose violent actions arise from threats against his people's existence and their relationship to God.

In the final form of Deuteronomy, the laws on war also play out against the background of the conquest accounts in Deuteronomy 1–3 and the portrayal of the divine warrior described in Deuteronomy 32: “Deuteronomy describes war as it thinks it ought to be waged, depicting the proper role of the ‘citizen soldier’ in a restored and reformed practice of sacral war.”²⁶

The care for those captured in war corresponds to Deuteronomy's concern for the most needy *inside* the people of Israel, such as the Levites, the orphans, the widows—in addition to the foreigners (Deut 14:28–29; 16:11–15). As Markus Zehnder pointed out, the foreigners' rights of protection and their inclusion in Israel have no parallels in Assyrian material.²⁷ However, this positive view of the foreigners does, for religious reasons, not imply a confusion of *the identity* of God's people with the identity of the foreigners. This position was strengthened in postexilic times, as we can read in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.²⁸

A Concern for All Human Beings Based on God's Justice

What we see, then, is that the laws on war in Deuteronomy introduce changes of the war ethics occurring in the conquest narratives. These innovations reflect a human concern, which is based on justice and righteousness and is a characteristic feature of other legal materials in Deuteronomy as well, such as the law of the king (Deut 17:14–20).²⁹

The law of the king makes it clear that the king's rights were not dependent on his power, only on rights legitimized by God: It was the king's duty to read this law, so that he may learn to fear the LORD and diligently *observe* (*‘asah*) all of it. The king should be the defender of justice and righteousness, as God is. Ps 72:1 says, “Give the king *your* justice, O God, and *your* righteousness to a king's son.”³⁰ Therefore, also the enemies in war should not to be dehumanized; prisoners of war should be well treated, and not killed (2 Kgs 6:18–23).

By comparison, texts from the ancient Near East show that kings would always claim that their actions, including warfare, served the law, served truth and justice, and any criticism of wars was generally not of an ethical character; one should not criticize the king as a warrior, his military activities were part of a *cosmic struggle against chaos* in order to maintain social order, and warfare was always caused by resistance to Assyrian hegemony. Military violence was thereby not only morally accepted but morally imperative. By con-

26. Nelson, *Deuteronomy* [see n. 19], 245–46.

27. Markus Zehnder, *Umgang mit Fremden in Israel und Assyrien: Ein Beitrag zur Anthropologie des “Fremden” im Licht antiker Quellen* (BWANT 168; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005). In addition to the relevant chapters, see the summary, pp. 542–54.

28. See Udo Rüterswörden, “Das Bild des Fremden im Alten Orient und im Alten Israel,” in Schweitzer, *Religion, Politik und Gewalt* [see n. 10], 326–42.

29. On such changes of ethics in Deuteronomy and other books in the HB/OT, see further Frank Crüsemann, “Gewaltimagination als Teil der Ursprungsgeschichte: Banngebot und Rechtsordnung im Deuteronomium,” in Schweitzer, *Religion, Politik und Gewalt*, 343–60; Gertz, “Regulierung,” 316–23.

30. Cf. Crouch, *War and Ethics* [see n. 6], 21–32, 48–64, 96–98, 191–95.

trast, Israel's God YHWH did not tolerate that kind of violence but put *a limit to violence*. Such humane consideration does not occur in other war texts from the ancient Near East.³¹ The Hebrew Bible presupposes another way of thinking of God than that reflected in conceptions of gods in the surrounding cultures.³²

It is against this background that some scholars argue that Deuteronomy is the first treatise on political philosophy in antiquity, prior to Plato's *Republic* (*Politeia*, ca. 380 BCE), and also that many of the moral principles in Deuteronomy are reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in other similar resolutions in our time. Thus, Deuteronomy is an important part of the Jewish-Christian ideological heritage of modern democratic societies.³³

What we see in these texts, then, are examples of an *inner-biblical dialogue*, in which the Deuteronomists reformulated war ethics of earlier times in the light of the innovation programme of Deuteronomy.³⁴ Against this backdrop, they did not accept the ethical standard of parts of the conquest accounts.³⁵

4 THE DECLINE OF DIVINE WAR IN THE HISTORY WRITINGS

The above observations indicate that Hebrew Bible/Old Testament war ethics were not static, but were adapted to new situations and circumstances.³⁶ We will give some more examples of such changes in the history writings.

It is of significance that divine war was a phenomenon mainly limited to the conquest period; both the book of Kings and the book of Chronicles relate few accounts of military activities from the later history, and none of substance later than the reign of King Hezekiah (2 Kgs 19; 2 Chr 32). In the book of Chronicles, which presents the history of Israel anew, to a later generation, there are even fewer references to divine war than in the Deuteronomistic History, and the book of Chronicles is almost silent about the conquest of Canaan;

31. Cf. Crüsemann, "Gewaltimagination," 343–60.

32. See Gertz, "Regulierung" [see n. 25], 316–23.

33. This was especially emphasized by Eckart Otto, *Krieg und Frieden in der Hebräischen Bibel und im Alten Orient: Aspekte für eine Friedensordnung in der Moderne* (Theologie und Frieden 18; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1999), 152–56. Cf. idem, "Zwischen Imperialismus und Friedensoption" [see n. 10], 253–61.

34. For examples of Deuteronomy's innovation programme with regard to the cultic centralization, as well as the celebration of Passover and the Festival of unleavened bread, and the administration of justice including the king's duties, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

35. On this aspect of the concerns of the Deuteronomists, see Harald Samuel, "Deuteronomic War Prescriptions and Deuteronomistic Wars," in *The Reception of Biblical War Legislation in Narrative Contexts* (ed. C. Berner and H. Samuel; BZAW 460; Berlin/Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 139–54, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110349726-010>.

36. Cf. Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), who identifies a variety of war ideologies, seven altogether, in the Hebrew Bible, and explains, in each case, why and how these views might have made sense to the biblical authors. Her study sheds light on the social and cultural history of Israel, and she contends that the war texts reflect the worldviews of biblical authors from various periods and settings.

from the early history it only relates the report on King David's capture of Jerusalem and his victories over the Philistines, the Ammonites and the Arameans (1 Chr 11; 14; 19–20).

In its presentation of the *later* history of Israel, the book of Chronicles mentions only a few incidents of divine war (e.g., 2 Chr 13; 14; 20; 21) and the above-mentioned example during the reign of King Hezekiah, which is related in 2 Chr 32:20–23, is much shorter than that in 2 Kgs 19:19–36. The kings of Judah and Israel probably engaged in more war actions than reported and the reason for this decline or absence may have to do with the ethical standing of the author(s).³⁷ The book of Chronicles lays emphasis on rituals performed by the temple officials in their preparations for war, and on the pious king who seeks YHWH (2 Chr 20:3). It is also concerned with the *universal* implications of YHWH's power. For instance, the end of the report on King Jehoshaphat's defeat of other nations reflects the ideology of Chronicles, which reads, "the fear of God came on all the kingdoms of the countries when they heard that YHWH had fought against the enemies of Israel" (2 Chr 20:29). In Chronicles, military success is the result of divine-human alignment in the service of order, and salvation is more important than the conquest of the land. Divine war is first and foremost a paradigm showing how YHWH—and only YHWH—will save the world and eliminate evil.³⁸

These features indicate that the post-exilic authors of the book of Chronicles were more critical to the idea of YHWH as warrior than earlier generations of historians were. YHWH was primarily the saviour of the world, who led his people through rituals and worship.

Still, the Hebrew Bible relates other instances showing how YHWH executed power, which create ethical problems to modern readers. One of the most well known is the liberation narrative in Exodus 1–15, to which we now turn.

5 THE DESTRUCTION OF THE EGYPTIANS AT THE SEA OF REEDS ("RED SEA")

The narrative in Exodus 1–15 culminates in God's liberation of the Israelites through the Sea of Reeds (ET: Red Sea, Exod 13:18; 15:4).³⁹ The end of chapter 14 reads,

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. [...] Then Moses

37. Cf. Crouch, *War and Ethics* [see n. 6], 80–96, who suggests this explanation as one of several possible reasons.

38. On these conceptions of YHWH in Chronicles, see Andreas Ruffing, *Jahwekrieg als Weltmetapher: Studien zu Jahwekriegstexten des chronistischen Sondergutes* (SBB 24; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992), 359–63; Ehud Ben Zvi, *History, Literature and Theology in the Book of Chronicles* (Bible World; London/Oakville, ON: Equinox, 2006), 160–73; Rüdiger Schmitt, *Der "Heilige Krieg" im Pentateuch und im deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk: Studien zur Forschungs-, Rezeptions- und Religionsgeschichte von Krieg und Bann im Alten Testament* (AOAT 381; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011), 165–69, and recently Louis C. Jonker, *Defining All-Israel in Chronicles: Multi-levelled Identity Negotiation in Late Persian-Period Yehud* (FAT 106; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 8–13, 117–22, 135–37.

39. See Christoph Dohmen, *Exodus 1–18: Übersetzt und ausgelegt* (HThKAT; Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 2015), 272–73, 359–67.

and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: “[...] horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. [...] The LORD is a warrior [...] your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy. [...] your fury, it consumed them like stubble. [...] Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?” (Exod 14:30–31; 15:1, 3, 6–7, 11).

Such language seems to confirm the impression of YHWH being a violent god, who inflicts a terrible fate on others, perhaps even innocent people, in order to free his chosen people. The narrative presents YHWH as consuming fury, who exterminates a whole army, YHWH is “a man of war” (*’ish milkhamah*), who promotes violence.

However, this negative judgement on YHWH and YHWH’s actions at the Sea of Reeds is not appropriate, for it fails to notice what is going on throughout the narrative, and what the scarlet thread that runs through it is. We mention two aspects that shed light on these issues: the narrative context and the hermeneutical problem.

The Narrative Context

First, since the event at the Sea of Reeds is part of a narrative beginning with Exodus 1 and ending with chapter 15, one should interpret it in the light of this context: the liberation narrative (= the Passover narrative). This context requires some comments:

The narrative begins with the presentation of a new Pharaoh who regards the Israelites as his enemies and oppresses them by ordering their firstborn to be killed (Exod 1). Then a later Pharaoh reacts with increased oppression when he hears of the Israelites’ desire to celebrate a festival to YHWH, the God of Israel in the wilderness: He commands heavier work to be laid on them (Exod 5). Pharaoh several times promises to let the Israelites leave the country (Exod 8:4 [ET: 8], 24 [ET: 28]; 9:28), but each time he revokes his permission. Finally, Pharaoh’s dialogue with Moses ends with a threat, Pharaoh saying, “Get away from me! Take care that you do not see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die” (Exod 10:28). After that the dialogue collapses. Later, after the slaying of the firstborn, Pharaoh sends Moses and the Israelites away from the country, for they feared that all would die (Exod 12:31–32). However, when Pharaoh learns that they had left, he changed his mind once again and pursued the Israelites with his army (Exod 14:5–9). In short, the narrative is as much about Pharaoh misusing *his* power as about God using *his* power; what happens at the Sea of Reeds is the culmination of Pharaoh’s long and recurrent resistance to the demands of God and his people, and of Pharaoh’s unwillingness to keep his promises. The narrative is concerned with *the injustice and unreliability of Pharaoh*.

The Hermeneutical Problem: God Puts a Limit to Human Violence

Second, this narrative raises a hermeneutical issue: Do we read it as a historical report, which portrays a violent, despotic god, or as a narrative, which communicates a theological message, describing God in relation to God’s adversaries? To provide an answer, we notice that the Israelites did no harm to the Egyptians (except when Moses slayed the Egyptian foreman, Exod 11:2–3), whereas Pharaoh treated them unjustly. It is quite clear that violence in this narrative starts *with Pharaoh*, not with God, and that Pharaoh also is respon-

sible for the *increase of violence* and its consequences. Pharaoh is unjust; he had no mandate from God for suppressing the Israelites and not letting them leave. And he did not keep his promises; he was unreliable.

This means that the liberation narrative includes a fundamental theological problem, namely: Is God just, is God righteous? Will God punish the unjust Pharaoh? The issue of *divine justice* is at stake. And the narrative itself gives an answer; it says that the last sufferings inflicted on Egypt, the killing of the firstborn (Exod 12) and the collective drowning at the Sea of Reeds (Exod 14), are all the results of Pharaoh's repeated resistance and unreliability; again and again Pharaoh breaks his promises. Pharaoh was given several chances, but he rejected them all. His sufferings and the extermination of his army are the ultimate way in which God deals with human resistance showing the extremes to which God will go if nothing else works. In short, God's violent actions are God's ultimate reaction to human resistance to him. The image of the biblical God would be flawed if God were to pass over the injustice described in Exodus 1–14.⁴⁰

These observations show that violence in the liberation narrative does not have its roots in God, but in Pharaoh, in his fears, his political interests, his ideology of superiority, and in the fact that he did more than he had mandate to do. There is a dynamic movement in the narrative, from Pharaoh's negotiations with Moses and Aaron until Pharaoh terminates the negotiations with a threat. Violence tends to intensify, when it is not countered or stopped. As long as the conflicting parties are in dialogue, there may still be the chance of a peaceful outcome.

But Pharaoh hardened his heart, again and again. From a theological point of view, it is significant that in the first part of the narrative *Pharaoh* is the subject of the hardening of his heart (Exod 7:13, 22; 8:15; cf. 9:35), but then, from chapter 9 onwards, God takes over and becomes the subject of the hardening: "The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh ("harden", *khzq*, piel)." This is said seven times throughout the last chapters (9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17), and it accumulates in the event at the Sea of Reeds, since the narrative relates as much as three times that God hardened not only the heart of Pharaoh but also the hearts of the Egyptians (14:17).

Exodus 1–15 can therefore be read as a model narrative, which demonstrates the fundamental opposition between human violence (exemplified by the reigning Pharaohs) and God's determination to end such violence—even by the exercise of divine power, if all other means fail.⁴¹ Pharaoh and Egypt are *paradigms of the evil of the nations*, if and when they oppose the will of God by exceeding what they have divine mandate to do. In the case of Pharaoh, God put a limit to his cruel actions.

This idea is developed in the song of praise that ends the narrative (Exod 15).

40. Georg Fischer, "Who is Violent, and Why? Pharaoh and God in Exodus 1–15 as Model for Violence in the Bible," in *Encountering Violence in the Bible* (ed. M. Zehnder and H. Hagelia; The Bible in the Modern World 55; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 94–107 (96). See also Jerome F. D. Creach, *Violence in Scripture* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 51–58.

41. Fischer, "Who is Violent," 106; cf. Dohmen, *Exodus 1–18*, 360–63.

Pharaoh and Egypt as Paradigms of Evil: Exodus 15 and Beyond

Exodus 15 relates a song, which Moses and the Israelites sang after the Egyptian army had been destroyed, and they look forward to the final destination of the journey through the wilderness. Verse 17 reads,

You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O LORD, that you made your abode, the sanctuary (*miqqdash*), O LORD, that your hands have established.

The mountain referred to is not Mount Sinai, but Mount Zion, and the sanctuary is the Temple in Jerusalem, not the tabernacle (*mishkan*) or the tent of meeting (*'ohel mo'ed*) in the wilderness. These references are only some of many indications that the song in Exod 15:1–21 should be ascribed to a late, probably post-priestly redaction of the Pentateuch.⁴²

Thus, in this song we hear the later congregation in the Temple praising God for his acts of salvation to them, also in times *after* their years in the wilderness, when they had settled in Canaan. The congregation mentions the peoples whom the Israelites met on their journey when approaching Canaan: “Terror and dread fell upon them by your mighty arm” – upon Philistia, Edom, Moab, and Canaan (vv. 14–16). We know from other sources (e.g., Ezek 25; 29–32) that all these peoples rejoiced later when Jerusalem was destroyed and Judah went into exile in 586 BCE; they even failed to help Judah (cf. Edom, Ob 11–21), and the Pharaoh of Egypt, too, was an unreliable ally in this situation. Therefore God said to these peoples, “I will make you perish out of the countries. I will destroy you, I will execute judgements upon you, I will make your land desolate, I will execute great vengeance on you” (Ezek 25:7, 11, 13, 17); and to Pharaoh God said, “I am against you” (Ezek 29:3). Pharaoh was the worst enemy of all because of his arrogance; he had said, “The Nile is mine, and I made it” (Ezek 29:9).

God put a limit to the violence of all these nations and ended it, because God is a God of justice and order. This is the theological message of the liberation narrative in Exodus 1–15. The narrative connects to the later history of Israel.

However, the people of Israel were not treated differently. When the Israelites conquered the land, they were commanded *not* to engage in battle with Edom, Moab or with the Ammonites, to whom God already had given land by expelling the peoples who lived there earlier, so that *they* could settle in their place, exactly as Israel did in the land that God gave *them* as a possession (Deut 2:5–22). Thus, God also put a limit to *Israel's actions*, to *their conquest* of land; Israel should respect the borders of the land of those nations, since

42. This is a widespread scholarly opinion, see Christoph Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung: Das literarische Werden einer Ursprungslegende Israels* (FAT 73; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 389–405, and further the survey of recent research on the Pentateuch by Konrad Schmid, “Von der Diaskeuase zur nachendredaktionellen Fortschreibung: Die Geschichte der Erforschung der nachpriesterschriftlichen Redaktionsgeschichte des Pentateuch,” in *The Post-Priestly Pentateuch: New Perspectives on its Redactional Development and Theological Profiles* (ed. F. Giuntoli and K. Schmid; FAT 101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 1–18 (12–17). Cf. also Creach, *Violence*, 50–51. Dohmen, *Exodus 1–18*, 354, argues that the terms in question may also include references to Sinai and the tent of meeting.

God governed them and took care of them as he did with Israel.⁴³ In addition, Israel was in danger of being punished by God if *they* exceeded their mandate from God. In fact, this is what happened in 586 BCE when Jerusalem was besieged and parts of her population was forced into exile, after more than once having disobeyed the law and worshiped other gods (2 Kgs 21:10–16; 24:3–4; Jer 6:2, 9, 11–12, 30; 7:18–20, 29). Israel had provoked God’s anger, his wrath. In the Jeremiah texts we meet the same terms—anger and wrath (*’af* and *khemah*)—as in the descriptions of God’s punishment of other peoples (Isa 30:30; 34:2; 59:18). God shows justice to both Israel and the nations.

6 PROBLEMATIC PHRASES AND IMAGES: DO THEY APPLY TO A VIOLENT GOD?

However, there are other passages using phrases and images that may seem to portray God in violent terms. These occur in particular in some Psalms and in prophetic books.

Three Psalms

Psalm 109 contains a prayer saying, “May my accusers be clothed with dishonour; may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle” (v. 29). The problem is that the psalmist is the victim of false accusation; his petition to God is a plea to stop the abusive treatment and to judge his opponents justly; they deserve to be punished since they did not show mercy but pursued the poor and the needy. And the psalm does not end with the psalmist’s hatred for his enemy, but with his trust in God: “Help me, O LORD my God! Save me according to your steadfast love (*khesed*, v. 26) [...] For (*ki*) he [God] stands at the right hand of the needy, to save them from those who would condemn them to death” (v. 31). This is how God is: just and righteous. With this confidence in God who helps and protects the needy, the prayer ends. The concern of the psalmist is to remind God of his righteousness and justice; it is not to describe a violent God.⁴⁴

It is in such a *theological* context that one should interpret the harsh appeals to God for revenge against his enemies, such as those in Psalm 137. This psalm begins, “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” And it ends, “O daughter Babylon, you who are devastated (or: you devastator)! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (vv. 8–9). Doesn’t such language presuppose the idea of a

43. Cf. similarly Amos 9:7 relating YHWH saying, “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?”

44. Erich Zenger emphasizes this point and says that Psalm 109 is by no means a call for vengeance, which has been a widespread misunderstanding of it in Christian liturgies throughout the centuries; he interprets the psalm in the context of the three Davidic Psalms 108–110 and contends that Psalm 109 provides a substantial contribution to Royal ideology: the King, who himself needed YHWH’s protection, also protected the needy and judged his people with justice; see Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150: Übersetzt und ausgelegt* (HThKAT; Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 2008), 176–95 (194–95). Cf. also Creach, *Violence*, 201–3.

violent god who kills innocent children? Again, this is not the point. The psalm appeals to God to *be just*. Babylon had, according to Jer 50:29–33, “arrogantly defied YHWH,” therefore YHWH was against them and announced that the arrogant should stumble and fall. What was the arrogance of Babylon? Jer 50 answers, “The people of Israel are oppressed, and so too are the people of Judah; all their captors have held them fast and refuse to let them go” (v. 33). In short, Babylon exceeded its mandate given by God, like the other nations including Egypt had done earlier; the Babylonians went too far when they refused to let the people of Israel return home. The appeal in Psalm 137 is a cry of desperation in a situation, in which the true reality of God himself as a saving God is at risk; but it is also *a call for justice* in a concrete historical situation, it implores God not to disappoint his love for Zion. The call for divine action that occurs in verse 9 expresses the longing for an end of the cruel actions of evil regimes. Certainly, the psalm contains horrible images of violence, but these are used to underscore its main point, which is the cry for retaliation according to the principles of talion, and to that extent for the restoration of the distorted order of justice. It is a psalm from the lips of the victims of brutal actions carried out by brutal powers.⁴⁵

Finally, also in Psalm 139 the psalmist expresses a harsh wish, which seems, at first glance, to describe God in violent terms: “O that you would kill the wicked, O God [...] Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies” (vv. 19, 21–22). It should be noted, however, that the psalmist does not say, “I hate those who hate *me*.” Rather, he asks, “Do I not hate those who hate *you*, O LORD?” This means that they are not his personal enemies, but the enemies of God. This is emphasized by the verb “hate”, which is covenantal terminology, the opposite of the covenantal verb “love” (Mal 1:2–5; Deut 7:7–11; 30:6; 1 Sam 20:12–17). Thus, the point is that the psalmist expresses his loyalty to God, who is his covenant partner; he does not support those who act against God’s will, and he wants to be known by God and governed by God’s will. Moreover, the psalmist appeals to God to re-establish divine justice. This way of speaking does not promote divine violence; on the contrary, it is a refusal to ally with the bloodthirsty, with those who seek violence.⁴⁶

Animal Imagery, Metaphors from Nature: Do They Describe a Violent God?

Another feature, which also is strange to a modern reader—and seems to reflect the idea of a violent God—is the animal imagery applied to God: God is “like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to Judah” (Hos 5:14); YHWH has “torn” his people, like a lion does (Hos 6:1). The lion image is also applied to YHWH’s agent in the judgement and denotes his cruelty and power (Jer 4:7). Moreover, against other peoples, such as Edom and Babylon, God “comes up like a lion from the thickets of the Jordan and chases them away” from the land (Jer 49:19; 50:44). Thus, God is described by animal images and, as seen above, by human images. Perhaps Egyptian descriptions of deities in Ancient Egypt

45. See Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, 684–701 (700–701).

46. Cf. Creach, *Violence*, 211–12; cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalmen 101–150*, 730–31.

can explain this phenomenon: In Egyptian traditions both animal and man images are applied to gods in order to emphasize their power and it seems plausible to explain such imagery in biblical texts against this background: It emphasizes that YHWH is a mighty God.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the divine judgement is illustrated by metaphors from nature: the enemy is a hot, strong wind from the desert; this indicates intensity and uncontrollable speed of destruction (Jer 4:11); the enemy comes up like clouds, his chariots like the whirlwind, his horses are swifter than eagles, therefore “we are ruined!” (Jer 4:13). All these metaphors describe the fierce (or burning) anger of YHWH (*kharon ’af yhwah*, Jer 4:8). God repays evil (*ra’ah*) with evil (*ra’ah*, Jer 4:6, 14). Such phrases express the idea of a *just God, who reacts to evil*; in spite of continuous prophetic warnings the people did not return; therefore God’s reaction is just and understandable. With the help of this sin-and-punishment cycle, the editors of the book of Jeremiah theologically explained the disaster in 586 BCE.

7 PUNISHMENT AND HOPE

However, alongside the above-mentioned passages expressing a total divine punishment and disaster, we find some unexpected elements of *hope*. Having announced a desolation of the whole land caused by his fierce anger, God adds, “Yet I will not make a full end.” We can also translate, “Yet I will not annihilate (it) completely” (Jer 4:27). In the context of Jeremiah’s vision (Jer 4:23–26) this statement seems to be inconsistent with other descriptions saying that God destroys completely. And this is not the only occurrence of such inconsistency; also in Jeremiah 5, in a description of punishment, God commands, “[...] destroy, but do not make a full end [...] even in those days, says the LORD, I will not make a full end of you” (vv. 10, 18).⁴⁸ To the readers of the book of Jeremiah such statements indicate that the God of Israel is not to be reduced to justice alone. A *just* God would have destroyed his unfaithful people completely and without showing mercy. Justice and destruction, however, did not have the last word: the (first) readers of the book belonged to the surviving part of Israel. And this message helped them to express the issue of violence and destruction in terms of integrating the catastrophe in 586 as a genuine part of Israel’s identity in post-exilic times. Their identity was based on their experience of disaster, of God’s violent actions against them, but also on their experience of survival and restoration, of God who rescued them.⁴⁹

Again, Israel was not the only people that experienced divine mercy; also the nations were protected by God, and Egypt is a good example of God’s concern for the nations:

47. See Kirsten Nielsen, “Jeg er som en løve for Efraim: Overvejelser over dyrebilleder og gammeltestamentlig teologi,” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 70 (2005): 215–27.

48. On this inconsistency, see Georg Fischer, *Jeremia 1–25: Übersetzt und ausgelegt* (HThKAT; Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 2005), 226, 243–44, 247–48.

49. Karin Finsterbusch, “Violence against Judah and Jerusalem: The Rhetoric of Destruction within Jeremiah 1–6,” in Zehnder and Hagelia, *Encountering Violence in the Bible* [see n. 40], 79–93 (92–93).

Egypt, the enemy par excellence, was not completely eradicated. On the contrary, YHWH promised to restore the Egyptians and bring them back home, to a part of their land, to Pathros in the southern part of Egypt. Thus, Egypt was given new possibilities after its disaster, as was Israel after the exile in Babylon (Ezek 29:13–16).

This takes us to some further reflections on God's mercy and grace.

8 THE ONLY GOD: A GOD OF MERCY AND GRACE—FOR ALL PEOPLES

The belief in God's justice offered a potential for breaking the relationship between violence and counter-violence. In the course of time, this is exactly what happened: The idea began to emerge that God's mercy, his willingness to forgive, was stronger than his wrath, his anger. The idea also developed that God himself suffered because of his people when they disobeyed his law, and that God (therefore) would defeat his wrath.

It is of great theological significance that this belief becomes dominant in *late* passages. It found a prominent expression in Hos 11:8–9, in a speech of God, who asks,

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? [...] My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

Commenting on this passage, Fredrik Lindström correctly argues that because YHWH is God, and no mortal (not a man), YHWH's holiness includes the notion that YHWH also is able to save his guilty people; YHWH is suffering with them and shows them his compassion.⁵⁰ The statement in Hos 11:8–9 is either from the latest years of the prophet's mission or from later times and should, in the latter case, be ascribed to the tradents or redactors. It reflects a theology based on the people's long experience with YHWH's actions, and it offers a reformulation of their belief in YHWH.⁵¹

One argument that may indicate that the idea of YHWH's compassion is a late insertion into the Hosea passage is the fact that the very same idea often occurs in the Book of the Twelve Prophets ("the minor prophets"). It serves to emphasize that God's mercy and grace are stronger than his anger and wrath. This notion, which runs as a scarlet thread through the book, was probably developed by the editors and is their reception of the words in Exod 34:6–7 reading,

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and

50. See Fredrik Lindström, "‘Jag är Gud och inte människa’ (Hos 11:9): Kan Guds medlidande besegra våra antropomorfa gudsbilder?," *Teologisk Tidsskrift* 3 (2014): 136–55 (147–51). The MT of the last clause in Hos 11:9 is uncertain; cf. the apparatus. It is not necessary here to discuss Lindström's reading, "I will not enter the city."

51. Cf. Jörg Jeremias, *Der Prophet Hosea: Übersetzt und erklärt* (ATD 24.1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 18–20, 140–46.

transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children, to the third and the fourth generation.

There are several quotations of, or allusions to, this so-called “grace formula” in the Book of the Twelve: Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Mic 7:18–20; Nah 1:2–3. God’s steadfast love and mercy are also mentioned in Hos 2:21[ET 2:19] or as something the Israelites are missing or should be practicing (Hos 4:1; 6:4, 6; 10:12; 12:7). Certainly, the negative part of the formula, warning that God will punish either Israel or the peoples (Nineveh), also appears through the Book of the Twelve (Hos 1:4; 2:15; 4:9, 14; 8:13; 9:9; 12:3; Amos 3:2, 14; Zeph 1:8, 9, 12). Thus, both parts of the formula are present, but *only with its positive part as far as Israel is concerned*. Therefore, the Book of the Twelve can be read as the editors’ commentary on the formula in Exod 34:6–7; they state that “there will be punishment, but in the end God’s mercy and steadfast love shall prevail.”⁵²

Such conceptions of God’s holiness and God’s mercy in late Hebrew Bible/Old Testament times were capable of paving the way not only for salvation after judgement and punishment, but also for reconciliation between YHWH and his people as well as other nations. It made it possible to supplant violence and counter-violence by mercy and, in the decline and fall of the kingdom of Judah, to replace loyalty to the human king—which is so strongly emphasized in the Assyrian texts—by absolute loyalty to YHWH, the God of Israel. These aspects of the belief in YHWH included changes of ethics, which are reflected in the history writings and were developed by the prophets: YHWH had plans for the people’s welfare and not for harm, to give them a future with hope (Jer 29:11).

The developments culminate in the message of the post-exilic prophets, who predicted an abolition of weapons and a pilgrimage of all nations to Zion in the last days. In modern terms, these prophets expressed hope for a peaceful solution of international conflicts on the basis of universal human rights founded on the law. Passages such as Isa 2:2–4 (par Mic 4:1–5), Zech 14:16–21 (and Ps 46:9–12) provide evidence of this radical change in post-exilic times.⁵³ The change even included the participation of foreigners in the temple service and their rights to minister before YHWH as priests and Levites (Isa 66:21). Certainly, there are voices nuancing the picture, but the universal hope of peace and common worship are dominating features of late prophecy.

These conceptions of God who creates peace can also explain why texts that refer to the Israelites’ return to Jerusalem from Babylon do not promote military strategies for YHWH’s people; there is *no divine war*, *no extermination of other peoples* in the description of the exodus from Babylon. Thus, it is not accidental that in Isaiah 35 the way through the wilderness to Zion, which refers to that event, is described in peaceful terms.⁵⁴ Even

52. Cf. Rainer Kessler, “The Twelve: Structure, Themes, and Contested Issues,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets* (ed. C. J. Sharp; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 207–23 (216).

53. See Otto, “Zwischen Imperialismus und Friedensoption” [see n. 10], 253–61.

54. Isaiah 35 has several thematic and terminological links to Isaiah 40–55 (e.g., Isa 35:10 and 51:11) and can be regarded as a prologue, in which the redactors summarize the message of these chapters; cf. Hallvard Hagelia, “The Holy Road as a Bridge: The Role of Chapter 35 in the Book of Isaiah,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 20 (2006): 38–57 (49–53, 57), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09018320600757010>; Willem A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja 28–39: Übersetzt und ausgelegt* (HThKAT; Freiburg i.B.: Herder, 2010), 332–36.

the foreign king Cyrus is portrayed as YHWH's Messiah, whom YHWH aroused *in righteousness*, the king who set the exiles free (Isa 45:1, 13).

Moreover, in these texts the uniqueness and incomparability of the God of Israel is most strongly emphasized, when YHWH proclaims,

I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? [...] Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one (Isa 44:6, 8).

We should note that these words follow immediately after YHWH calls himself the King of Israel and Israel's *Redeemer*, who brought them out of the exile in Babylon (44:6).

In other words, only as an exclusive God, the only God, was YHWH capable of bringing his people out of Babylon, as he had done in earlier times when he brought their ancestors out of Egypt. YHWH's righteousness and justice materialized in his salvation of those who had been judged and made atonement for their bad actions. "YHWH is the only God who is just and saves. His righteousness in relation to Israel consists in the fact that it is saving righteousness, a 'salvation for eternities' (*teshu'at 'olamim*, Isa 45:17)."55

One may therefore conclude—and thus also modify Jan Assmann's argument—that there is a close connection between monotheism and salvation in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The only God is not only a violent God but also a merciful God, the redeemer and saviour of both his chosen people and the peoples. Monotheism and monotheistic language do not necessarily lead to violence and destruction but to peace and reconciliation. And this idea dominates in the latest passages in the Prophets.

9 SUMMARY

The article has shown how important it is to interpret conceptions of God in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in their historical and literary context. Descriptions of a violent God are only one of many facets of the picture and are especially connected to the exodus from Egypt and the conquest narratives. Thus, to a large extent, the ideas of a violent God and of divine war are limited to the early history of Israel. Deuteronomy partly criticizes that kind of warfare and introduces a change of ethics by emphasizing YHWH's concern for the needy ones—as well as for foreigners. According to the Deuteronomists, YHWH reacted with destruction only when the nations exceeded their mandate or refused to obey YHWH's demands, the Pharaoh of Egypt being a paradigm of such failures. YHWH also put a limit to their violent actions and, in some cases, spared these peoples; the law also required that the most vulnerable of the population should survive.

Moreover, YHWH gave some peoples the right to have land; therefore they should not be attacked by the Israelites. Foreign peoples should live in peace and only be executed if they enticed the Israelites to worship other gods. But also the Israelites should die, if *they* worshiped other gods or tried to lure others to idolatry.

55. Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 346–51 (350).

The historians who shaped the book of Chronicles were even more critical to the idea of YHWH as warrior: Divine war belonged more or less to the past; YHWH was not a cruel warlord, but first and foremost God of the cultic community.

The notion that YHWH is the Holy One, a just and righteous God, and the only God, provided the potential for developing other conceptions of YHWH: YHWH is a God who shows mercy and forgiveness. Thus, both Israel and other peoples were given a new chance after their punishment, and a central message of the post-exilic prophets is that YHWH will create peace for all nations, who will make a pilgrimage to Zion to worship YHWH in the last days. These prophets also developed the Deuteronomists' concern for the others outside Israel by predicting that, in the future, even foreigners will be allowed to minister before YHWH in the temple service.

In conclusion, it can be said that what forms the basis of these various descriptions of YHWH, the God of Israel, and the only God, is that YHWH shows justice and righteousness, mercy and love more than anger and wrath. In the words of the book of Micah: "The LORD has told you what he requires of you, to do justice and to love with kindness, and to walk humbly with your God [...] Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and showing faithfulness to Abraham, to whom he promised to bless all the peoples of the earth?" (Mic 6:8; 7:18–20; cf. Gen 12:3).

If such theology is taken seriously, the conceptions of God in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament can be instrumental in bringing about an end to conflicts and in creating justice, equality, and dignity among peoples in our time—with respect for the others.