Chapter 6

The Reader–Response Approach

One of the most important aspects of biblical scholarship during the past few decades has been a focus on the literary approach to the Bible, and many scholars have adopted the methodologies of comparative literature in an attempt to understand the biblical text. This trend has been chronicled many times and need not detain us here[1]. Our concern in this chapter, rather, is to pursue one particular approach suggested by secular literary critics which might prove helpful when considering the ethically problematic passages of Scripture. That approach is known as "reader–response criticism". This term is used to refer to a diverse assortment of methodologies and practices, and the spectrum of reader–response critics is so broad that it is questionable whether they should all be categorized under one neat heading[2]. Indeed, if we were to ask reader–response critics the ostensibly simple question, "Who *is* the reader?", it is likely that we would be provided with a confusingly large number of different answers, for over the years the discipline has developed a rich panoply of different types of "reader". These have been defined and classified in various ways, and include, for example, the "implied reader" (Iser, Booth), the "model reader" (Eco), the "ideal reader" (Culler), the "informed reader" (Fish) and the "actual reader" (Jauss), to name but a few[3].

The type of reader which will be of primary concern to us, however, will be the one designated by Judith Fetterley as the "resisting reader"[4]. Resisting readers feel that they have a duty to converse and interact with the text, and believe that literary compositions should be read in an openly critical, rather than in a passively receptive, way. Instead of tacitly accepting the standards of

[1] See Barton 1984; McKnight 1988; Thiselton 1992:515–55; Davies 2003a:20–37; Brett 1993:13–31; Aichele 1995:20–69.

[2] Many different approaches are represented in the volumes edited by Suleiman and Crosman (1980) and Tompkins (1980), both of which contain excellent annotated bibliographies. Suleiman (1980:3–45) subdivides reader-oriented (or, as she prefers to call it, "audience oriented") criticism into six major categories: rhetorical; semiotic and structuralist; phenomenological; subjective and psychoanalytic; sociological and historical; and hermeneutic.

[3] Other definitions include the "real reader", the "intended reader", the "hypothetical reader", the "authorial reader", the "competent reader", and the "average reader". See Fowler 1985:5–23; 1991:26.

[4] Fetterley's study of the "resisting reader" (1978), now commonly regarded as a classic of feminist reader–response criticism, was concerned to examine the problem encountered by the female reader reading male-oriented works of American literary fiction.

judgment established in the text and capitulating uncritically to its demands, they are prepared to challenge its assumptions, to question its insights, and (if necessary) to discredit its claims. They may want to resist texts that appear to be oppressive or tyrannical and reject demands that they feel should not (and perhaps cannot) be fulfilled. They may want to argue that the tradition underlying a particular text is ethically questionable and that to accept it as it stands is both morally and intellectually indefensible. In brief, they may want to read "against the grain" of the text and call its content into account in their own court of ethical judgment.

According to this approach, then, reading is not an exercise for passive spectators, for it involves a variety of activities, including reflection, judgment, appraisal, assessment, evaluation, and these activities, in turn, inevitably lead to approval or disapproval, acclaim or criticism, acceptance or rejection. The text opens itself up to a kind of dialogue between two interlocutors, and readers are challenged to contribute to the conversation with their own questions and reactions. Whereas readers have traditionally been content to ask, simply, "What does the text *say*?", the resisting reader will go a step further and ask, "What does the text say *to me*?" and, even more importantly, "What do *I* say *to it*?" (Jauss 1982:146–7). The reaction of the reader is regarded as of paramount importance, for the aim of reader–response criticism is to revitalize our engagement with the text and make us more conscious of our own response to what we are reading.

Wayne Booth, one of the most influential and engaging critics of secular literature, recounts how he became alerted to the importance of the effect of literature on those who read it by the reaction of one of his black colleagues at the University of Chicago, Paul Moses, who (much to the astonishment of his fellow teachers) expressed his unwillingness to teach *Huckleberry Finn* to a cohort of first-year students because of the deleterious effect its contents might have on the impressionable minds that might read it:

> It's hard for me to say this, but I have to say it anyway. I simply can't teach *Huckleberry Finn* again. The way Mark Twain portrays Jim is so offensive to me that I get angry in class, and I can't get all those liberal white kids to understand why I am angry. What's more, I don't think it's right to subject students, black or white, to the many distorted views of race on which that book is based. No, it's not the word "nigger" I'm objecting to, it's the whole range of assumptions about slavery and its consequences, and about how whites should deal with liberated slaves, and how liberated slaves should behave or will behave toward whites, good ones and bad ones. That book is just bad education, and the fact that it's so cleverly written makes it even more troublesome to me (Booth 1988:3; cf. 2006:225).

The words of Paul Moses (as recounted by Booth) underline one of the most important tenets of reader–response criticism, namely, that all literature should

be held ethically accountable, if only because of the profound influence, for good or ill, that it may exercise upon its readers. The American critic Stanley Fish, one of the leading figures in the reader–response movement, argued that all readers should be encouraged to reflect upon the impact that a literary work had had upon them, for the literary text was not so much an object to be analyzed as an effect to be experienced. Consequently, the fundamental question that should be asked of any text was not "What does this text *mean*?" but "What does this text *do*?" (Fish 1972:387–8). What kind of values does it advocate? Is it doing anyone any harm? What effect does it have upon its readers? Does it promote hatred and violence? Does it encourage racism, misogyny, colonialism, xenophobia or homophobia? Does it contribute to the general well-being of society or does it have a negative, detrimental effect, perhaps by reinforcing the language of oppression and domination? It was not enough for literary critics to understand the text or even to evaluate its content; it was their responsibility to consider the impact which any given text had on the individual who reads it.

Reader–response Criticism and the Hebrew Bible

Now the reader–response approach, and especially the notion of the "resisting reader", may provide a valuable resource for dealing with the ethically problematic passages of Scripture, for it is arguable that such passages are unsettling only because readers have been conditioned to remain slavishly respectful to the text's claims and to respond to its demands with uncritical obeisance[5]. Readers of the Hebrew Bible have traditionally felt themselves to be passive recipients of the text, obliged to submit to its authority and to acquiesce in its value judgments. The type of approach deployed by secular reader–response critics, however, serves to remind us that we have a duty to enter into dialogue with the text and to consider the extent to which the views adumbrated by the biblical authors agree or conflict with our own. As we read Scripture, we must respond as thinking individuals and feel free to draw our own conclusions regarding the validity or otherwise of its claims. Our task is to engage in a vigorous debate with the Hebrew Bible, resisting statements that appear to be morally objectionable, and taking a critical stance against what we may regard as the excesses of the biblical text. Unlike the "canon within the canon" approach, which has the effect of ignoring the ethically problematic passages of the Hebrew Bible (and thus downgrading them to a position of secondary importance), this strategy recognizes the canonical status of

[5] For reader–response approaches to the Bible, see Detweiler 1985; Croatto 1987; McKnight 1988, 1989; Clines 1990, 1995; and for a discussion of the way in which feminist biblical critics have appropriated the insights of reader–response criticism, see Davies 2003b.

these texts but invites the reader to wrestle with them and to question their presuppositions and ideologies.

Among scholars of the Hebrew Bible, David Clines has been in the vanguard of those who have argued that "understanding" the biblical text should not be the only (or even primary) goal of interpretation; rather, biblical scholars should be engaged in the business of critique, and should be prepared to evaluate the text's claims and assumptions. Clines concedes that such an approach may well cause a certain unease in scholarly circles, for biblical exegetes have generally been reticent to engage in what may be termed "ethical criticism" (Booth 1988:3–22); their interest, rather, has traditionally been that of the theologian, sociologist or anthropologist, and consequently they have conceived their task as being to describe, as dispassionately as possible, the customs, beliefs and practices of the ancient Israelites. What they have singularly failed to do, according to Clines, is to enter the domain of the moral philosopher and critically appraise the biblical statements. They have been quite prepared to question the historical accuracy or reliability of the biblical traditions, but have shied away from questioning the validity of its moral norms and underlying assumptions. They have usually proceeded from an examination of the text to an explanation of its meaning without pausing for a moment to pass judgment on its content. As a result, the task of evaluation has all but been evacuated from the realm of biblical criticism. In typical flamboyant style, Clines chides his fellow academics who have been content merely to describe the ethical values of the Hebrew Bible, and who have been unwilling to emerge from the safe haven of descriptive discourse to engage openly in the tasks of evaluation and critique:

> Not one academic biblical scholar in a hundred will tell you that their primary task is to *critique* the Bible. For some reason, we have convinced ourselves that our business is simply to *understand*, to *interpret*. Here we have some difficult texts from the ancient world, we say, rightly enough. Do you want to know what they *mean*? Then come to us, we are the experts, we *understand* them, we shall tell you how to *interpret* them. But don't ask us for *evaluation*, for *critique*. Oh no, we are objective scholars, and we prefer to keep hidden our personal preferences and our ethical and religious views about the subject matter of our study[6].

For Clines, such evaluation entails reading "against the grain" of the text or, in his terms, "reading from left to right". Hebrew convention, of course, demands that we read "from right to left", and Clines regards this expression

[6] Clines 1997:23 (his italics); cf. 1993:84–87; 1995:18–21. Prior expresses similar dissatisfaction with prevailing scholarly assessments of biblical texts, and argues that interpreters have generally preferred "the security of silence to risking the opprobrium of speaking out" (1997:294).

as a metaphor for the way in which the biblical authors would have wanted us to read the text, and how biblical commentators over the generations (with very few exceptions) *have* read the text. They have traditionally succumbed to its ideology, allowing themselves to be persuaded that it is obvious, natural and commonsensical. In the process, they have suppressed their critical instincts and screened out questions of value, thus leaving "half their proper task unattempted"[7]. Clines concedes that there is nothing inherently wrong with adopting the ideology of the text, provided we realize that that is what we are doing, and provided we do not object when we see other, less forgiving, readers reading "from left to right" by opposing the text's claims and questioning its ideology.

As Clines observes, there is no shortage of material in the Hebrew Bible that demands such ethical critique, for it contains numerous passages that should make us angry and provoke in all, apart from the emotionally anaesthetized, a sense of moral outrage. Such texts include Amos 6:4–7, which threatens with exile (!) the rich whose only "crime" appears to have been their penchant for luxurious living[8]; Psalm 24, which uses war imagery to describe the deity's activities (1995:175–6); and Psalm 2, which claims that the Israelite king will shatter the nations of the earth, though their only "crime" was their desire for freedom from bondage (1995:244–75). For Clines, it is not enough to understand and explain such texts, for the responsible interpreter must be prepared to repudiate, deplore and (if necessary) reject their claims. Biblical interpreters must consider themselves ethically accountable, for failure to critique the Hebrew Bible may be construed as tacit approval of the values it promotes, and a resolute refusal to engage in ethical judgment merely compounds the moral dubiety of the text by perpetuating its claims and lending it the interpreter's own moral authority.

[7] Clines 1995:21. In his discussion of Psalm 2, Clines states that "too many readers are in bondage either to the text or to the approved interpretations of the text—or to both" (1995:274). Earlier in the chapter he makes the same point, but in more exaggerated terms: "I stand to be corrected, but I believe that every interpretation of and commentary on this psalm ever written adopts the viewpoint of the text, and, moreover, assumes that the readers addressed by the scholarly commentator share the ideology of the text and its author" (244).

[8] Clines is so incensed at the injustice of such punishment (and even more so at the failure of commentators to criticize or even notice such injustice) that he gives free rein to his annoyance: "Is there some sin in having expensive ivory inlays on your bedframe?... No doubt meat of any kind was something of a delicacy in ancient Israel, and these people are eating meat of choice animals prepared for the table; but is that wrong?... And as for singing idle songs, who among the readers of Amos can cast a stone? Has karaoke suddenly become a sin, as well as a social disease? Drinking wine out of bowls instead of cups does admittedly sound greedy, and anointing yourself with the finest (and presumably most expensive) oil rather than bargain basement value-for-money oil is certainly self-indulgent. But how serious is self-indulgence? Is it a crime? Is it a sin that deserves a sentence of deportation? Does being wealthy and conspicuously consuming renewable natural resources (wine, oil, mutton and elephant tusks) put you in line for exile, by any reasonable standards?" (1995:78–80).

It should be emphasized at this point that reader–response criticism is concerned to critique not only the text itself but various readings of the text[9]. This process of "commenting on the commentators" has been labelled by Clines as "metacommentary", a term he explains as follows: "When we write commentary, we read what commentators say. When we write metacommentary, we notice what commentators do" (1995:76). In a provocative chapter entitled "Metacommentating Amos", he observes that what biblical commentators have done, almost without exception, is to adopt Amos' views regarding the social and economic ills of ancient Israel. The ideology of the text has cast its magic spell over them to such an extent that they have been seduced into a readerly identification with the prophet's outlook. Instead of taking a step back from the text and critically questioning its assumptions, they have merged into empathetic harmony with the text's ideology and have all but accepted it as their own. Such is the complicity between the text and its readers that they have automatically conferred unquestioned moral authority upon the prophet and accepted without further thought his own version of the truth. Amos claims to be a man of God, and so commentators assume that what he says must be right and true. Thus, when the prophet threatens with exile the self-indulgent who lie on beds of ivory and eat of the choicest meats (Am. 6:4–7), his social analysis is accepted without demur, and the threat of deportation is regarded as just and fair. Similarly, when Amos castigates the foreign nations for their antisocial activities, and threatens them with destruction and ruin (Am. 1:3–2:3), "high-minded commentators who would not harm a fly themselves suddenly join the hanging and flogging brigade and think no punishment too severe" (1995:91). The irony, of course, is that such interpreters often pride themselves on providing an interpretation that is neutral, dispassionate and value-free whereas, in fact, they have been taken in by the text's ideology, lulled into a state of passive acceptance, and seduced into accepting as valid and legitimate a set of values which, in their more guarded moments, they might reject, or at least question.

Not unnaturally, the reader–response approach will be regarded with considerable reserve by some biblical scholars, for to critique the biblical text may be construed as exhibiting a lack of deference towards the canon of Scripture, while criticizing one's fellow scholars may be viewed as an unseemly ruffling of feathers within the academy. Before considering such reservations, however, it will be convenient to consider how this approach might be helpful in discussing the "holy war" traditions of the Hebrew Bible.

[9] Feminist biblical critics have carried out this exercise to particularly good effect. Phyllis Trible, for example, in her discussion of Gen. 2–3, has argued that (predominantly male) interpreters have exhibited more misogynistic tendencies than the biblical text itself, which actually bears witness to a remarkable equality between the sexes in the original creation of humankind (1978:72–143; cf. Davies 2003b:99–103).

Reader–response Criticism and the "Holy War" Traditions

Now the biblical passages describing the annihilation of the Canaanites in Josh. 6–11 must surely feature prominently in the list of biblical texts that modern readers of Scripture would wish to question or reject, for the depiction of God encountered in these chapters is seriously defective, and the actions attributed to his people are clearly morally offensive. At this point, it might be appropriate to remind ourselves of the sheer horror of the account of the conquest of Canaan as depicted in Josh. 6–11, and the reasons afforded by Deuteronomy to justify the total annihilation of the indigenous population. The chapters in Joshua depict Israel as engaging in a "holy war" which involved the extermination of men, women, children and animals, and the wanton destruction of the cities in which they lived. In the space of twelve verses in Josh. 10 (vv. 28–39), the Israelites are said to have attacked six cities, in each case destroying every living person within them and leaving no survivors. The full impact of Joshua's massacre of this region of Canaan (the hill country, the Negeb, the lowland, and the slopes) is succinctly summarized in v. 40: "He left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel had commanded". The reasons given in Deuteronomy for destroying the Canaanites (and other inhabitants of the land listed in Deut. 7:1) are twofold. Firstly, it is implied that only by a programme of complete annihilation could Israel be protected from the malign influence of the native inhabitants, whose wickedness apparently knew no bounds (Deut. 7:3–4; 9:4; 20:17–18); secondly, it was only thus that God could honour his promise to give the gift of land to Abraham's descendants (Deut. 9:5; cf. Gen. 17:3–8).

Now the need for an ethical critique of Scripture is surely no more apparent than in these texts, since they inevitably raise some particularly troubling questions in the minds of all right-minded readers of the Bible[10]. For what type of God is it who demands (and receives) human sacrifice in exchange for victory[11]? What sort of deity is it who appears to approve of such wanton and meaningless destruction? How can such a supposedly benign God act with such malevolence? Does not the divine command to annihilate the Canaanites suggest that he is "a chauvinistic, nationalistic and militaristic xenophobe" (Prior 1997:13)? And does not his instruction to "utterly destroy" the native inhabitants of Canaan (Deut. 7:1–2) suggest a deity given to fanaticism, bigotry and intolerance? And what are we to make of the actions of the Israelites themselves? Should we not express our abhorrence at the gratuitous brutality

[10] This has been forcefully argued by Michael Prior, who comments: "When a people is dispossessed, dispersed and humiliated by others, one's moral sensitivities are enlivened. When such activities are carried out, not only with alleged divine support, but at the alleged express command of God, one's moral self recoils in horror. Any association of God with the destruction of people must be subjected to an ethical analysis" (1997:13).

[11] For the idea of the "ban" as a form of sacrifice to the deity, see Niditch 1993:29–37.

which they inflicted upon their victims? Would we want to defend their occupation of the "promised land", given that it involved genocide on such a mass scale, and would clearly be regarded today as a breach of international law and as a flagrant disregard of basic human rights (cf. Moyise 2004:99)? Indeed, does not the entire account of the excessive violence and cruelty inflicted upon the indigenous population of Canaan contradict the fundamental values of the biblical tradition, with its emphasis on the importance of preserving human life, its care for the oppressed and vulnerable in society (cf. Exod. 22:21–24), and its dire warnings against the shedding of blood (cf. Gen. 9:5)? And as for the justification provided in Deuteronomy for this act of genocide, are we really prepared to accept that the extermination of an entire population is the price that must be paid if the divine promise to the patriarchs was to be fulfilled? Even if the Canaanites were as decadent and immoral as the biblical tradition suggests (which is by no means certain), did the people really deserve to be decimated for their wickedness? The answer given to such questions may not satisfy, but at least reader–response criticism ensures that such questions are being asked.

The problem is, of course, that such questions seldom *are* asked in the standard biblical commentaries[12]. Even when the biblical text describes the decimation of an entire population by divine command, most commentators tend to bury their heads in the sand and pretend that no problem exists or, if they do concede that there is a problem, they appear unwilling to subject the text to serious and sustained ethical critique[13]. Indeed, if we apply Clines' "metacommentary" to the scholarly writings on the "holy war" traditions in the Hebrew Bible, what we usually find is that commentators have simply accepted at face value the ideology inscribed in the biblical text. For example, the reason the Canaanites deserved to be annihilated, according to Deut. 9:4–5; 18:9–14, was because they had profaned the land with their idolatry and abomination. Now a moment's thought should have alerted exegetes to the fact that this could not have been the *real* reason why the Canaanites had to be exterminated, for if they were annihilated simply on account of their wickedness, why was there need to destroy their animals as well? It is perfectly obvious that the real reason the Canaanites were decimated was because they happened to be living in the land in which the Israelites wanted to settle (or, rather, the land in

[12] The point is well made by Prior, who notes that the ethnocentric, xenophobic and militaristic character of the Hebrew Bible "is treated in conventional biblical scholarship as if it were above any questioning on moral grounds, even by criteria derived from other parts of the Bible. Most commentators are uninfluenced by considerations of human rights, when these conflict with a naïve reading of the sacred text, and appear to be unperturbed by its advocacy of plunder, murder and the exploitation of indigenous peoples, all under the guise of fidelity to the eternal validity of the Sinaitic covenant" (1997:291).

[13] In a random sample of commentaries on the book of Joshua, commentators seemed far more concerned to identify the cities destroyed by the invading Israelites than in addressing the ethical aspects of the invasion.

which God wanted the Israelites to settle)[14]. As James Barr has remarked, "the people of Jericho are consecrated to destruction for only one reason, namely that they are people living in Jericho" (1993:216–7). But this very obvious fact seems to have escaped many biblical commentators, who appear quite content to accept as axiomatic the judgment of the biblical authors regarding the corrupt nature and immoral practices of the Canaanites[15]. Thus, we are told by reputable scholars that the "ban" was only imposed upon nations that were "morally irredeemable" (Gordon 1986:147), and since the Canaanites were, in the words of George Ernest Wright, "one of the weakest, most decadent, and most immoral cultures of the civilized world at the time" (Wright and Fuller 1957:108), it is clear that they were "ripe for judgment" (Eichrodt I 1961:140). Far from engaging in an ethical critique of the biblical text, scholars practically vie with one another to defend the values which it adumbrates. W.F. Albright, for example, not only accepted the view of the biblical text that the Canaanites were wicked, but argued that this debased and degenerate culture needed to be replaced by one that was morally superior: "From the impartial standpoint of a philosopher of history, it often seems necessary that a people of markedly inferior type should vanish before a people of superior potentialities, since there is a point beyond which racial mixture cannot go without disaster"[16]. Indeed, he even went on to claim that it was fortunate for the faith of Israel that the annihilation of the indigenous population took place, for the Israelite "decimation of the Canaanites prevented the complete fusion of the two kindred folk which would almost inevitably have depressed Yahwistic standards to a point where recovery was impossible"[17]. So there we have it! Ethnic cleansing was a legitimate means of ensuring the religious and cultic

[14] This is why Deut. 20:10–18 states that if a city lies outside the land to be given by God as Israel's inheritance, the Israelites were to accept an offering of peace and subject the inhabitants to forced labour; only if the cities were within the land in which the Israelites were to settle were all the inhabitants to be killed.

[15] Kaiser is one of many biblical scholars who accepts unquestioningly the ideology of the biblical text: "When a people starts to burn their children in honor of their gods (Lev. 18:21), practice sodomy, bestiality, and all sorts of loathsome vices (Lev. 18:23, 24; 20:3), the land itself begins to "vomit" them out as the body heaves under the load of internal poisons (Lev. 18:25, 27–30)" (1983:268). Whitelam (1996:57) quotes the words of the Bishop of Salisbury in 1903, which betray a similar (albeit much earlier) uncritical acceptance of the biblical witness: "Nothing, I think, that has been discovered makes us feel any regret at the suppression of Canaanite civilization by Israelite civilization ... the Bible has not misrepresented at all the abomination of Canaanite culture which was superseded by the Israelite culture" (cited by Said 1992:79).

[16] Albright 1940:214. Whitelam claims that "the assumption of much of biblical scholarship is that 'Israelite' culture succeeds, replaces, and surpasses 'Canaanite' culture" (1996:52).

[17] Albright 1940:214. Whitelam (1996:6) maintains that two very different schools of thought, represented by Albright and Bright on the one hand and Alt and Noth on the other, shared the assumption that Israel was superior to the indigenous population of Canaan. Since Bright's *History* has proved so popular in British and American universities and seminaries, the notion of Israel's uniqueness and the superiority of her culture over that of Canaan has been absorbed unquestioningly by countless students over more than three decades.

purity of Israel[18]. The Canaanites were to be decimated because the Israelites lacked sufficient faith or strength of character to resist their malign influence. Apparently, the brutal annihilation of an entire population was all part of Israel's moral agenda. Even John Bright, while conceding that the conquest was a "bloody and brutal business", found himself desperately searching for some crumbs of comfort in the conquest narrative by emphasizing that "the *hērem* was applied only in the case of certain Canaanite cities that resisted" (1972:138–9), as though that made everything alright.

Of course, once scholars had managed to persuade themselves that the Canaanites were a morally degenerate nation, it became much easier to excuse the admittedly extreme measures that were taken to get rid of them. Thus, W.S. Bruce, for example, defended the "wars of extermination" against the indigenous peoples, claiming that the Israelites were merely "the instrument of the righteous Lord against those who had polluted His land with unspeakable defilement"[19]. G. E. Wright concluded that Israel was God's "agent of destruction against a sinful civilization", and in God's moral order "such flagrant wickedness must be destroyed" (Wright and Fuller 1957:108). But the most remarkable attempt to justify the extermination of the indigenous population came from W.F. Albright who, writing of the "ban", penned these astonishing words:

> Strictly speaking this Semitic custom was no worse, from the humanitarian point of view, than the reciprocal massacres of Protestants and Catholics in the seventeenth century ... or than the massacre of Armenians by Turks and of Kirghiz by Russians during the First World War, or than the recent slaughter of non-combatants in Spain by both sides. It is questionable whether a strictly detached observer would consider it as bad as the starvation of helpless Germany after the armistice in 1918 or the bombing of Rotterdam in 1940. In those days [i.e., in the days of ancient Israel] warfare was total, just as it is again becoming after the lapse of over three millennia[20].

[18] Cf. Collins 2005:62. A different reason is provided in Deut. 25:17–19 for exterminating the Amalekites from the land, namely, that they had shown a lack of compassion in attacking the Israelites during the wilderness wandering. As Hunter has observed, commentators have generally failed to appreciate that this is a classic case of portraying the victims as aggressors in order to justify their elimination (2003:99).

[19] Bruce 1909:287. As Niditch observed (1993:6), he even managed a condescending swipe at the Jewish people, claiming that "even the Jews have felt as if the command to destroy the Canaanites compromised the gracious character of Jehovah" (1909:283), the implication being that Christians would believe that as a matter of course, but the fact that even the Jews felt this way must make it all the more deplorable.

[20] Albright 1940:213. Whitelam comments that this justification of the slaughter of the Canaanites by one of the great icons of twentieth-century biblical scholarship represents "an outpouring of undisguised racism which is staggering" (1996:84). The original edition of Albright's work was published in 1940, with the third edition appearing in 1957. As Whitelam notes, it is surprising that even in the later edition, by which time the full horrors of the Holocaust had been exposed, Albright felt no need to revise his opinion

What becomes clear from applying a "metacommentary" to the conquest traditions recorded in Josh. 6–11 is that the great majority of commentators—both Christian and Jewish—align themselves with the dominant voice in the text and identify with the people of Israel as they read the biblical account[21]. Needless to say, that is precisely what the biblical writers would have wanted them to do, and it is a tribute to their success that they have been able to manipulate scholars into accepting their point of view, for the job of purveyors of ideology in every age has been to persuade people to see the world as *they* see it and not as it is in itself.

But suppose we were to refuse to be co-opted into accepting the ideology of the text? Suppose we were to read "against the grain" of these chapters and apply to them a "hermeneutic of suspicion"?[22] Suppose we were to read the conquest narratives from the perspective of the Canaanites as opposed to that of the Israelites?[23] If this were to happen, the entire story would, of course, be read in quite a different light. We would be raising questions regarding the legitimacy of Israel's occupation of the land, and wondering why the rights of the indigenous population had been so lightly dismissed[24]. We might even feel a sense of guilt that the native inhabitants' point of view had been neglected, and that the Canaanites had effectively been "explicitly excluded from the world of moral concern"[25].

When we come to ask the question posed by Stanley Fish, "What does this text *do*?", the immediate answer is that it has led biblical scholars (perhaps subconsciously) to regard the viewpoint reflected in the Hebrew Bible as "normative", thus making them, in effect, co-conspirators of the text's subversiveness. On

that a "superior" race had the right to exterminate an "inferior" one. Whitelam appears to have been the first to draw attention to the unfortunate statements of Albright and Wright quoted in the above paragraphs; the words of these two eminent biblical scholars have often featured in subsequent discussions of the ethics of "holy war"; see, e.g., Hunter 2003:101; Collins 2005:64.

[21] This is particularly evident in the comment by G.E. Wright to the effect that "it was a great thing for Israel that she got her land" and "it was likewise a great thing for the Canaanites in the long run" (Wright and Fuller 1957:108). As Whitelam notes, it is "astounding that he should believe that it was to the benefit of the indigenous people that they were wiped out and their land appropriated by Israelites or Arameans" (1996:94).

[22] The "hermeneutic of suspicion" has been applied very effectively to the Hebrew Bible by feminist biblical critics, most notably Esther Fuchs (2000); on the practice of "reading against the grain" of the text, see Moyise 2004:94–106; Davies 2003b:91–94.

[23] One of the merits of recent post-colonial studies of the Hebrew Bible is that its practitioners identify not with the Israelites but with the indigenous people whose land was taken away from them. See Prior 1997; Sugirtharajah 1998.

[24] As they are, for example, by Aharoni, who argued that the people of Israel were "the first and only people" to make the land of Canaan "its natural homeland" (1982:90). As Whitelam observes, no justification is given for this view, and no explanation is provided as to why it is Israel alone that can claim the territory as its "natural homeland" (1996:54).

[25] Walzer 1985:142; cf. Collins 2005:64. As Whitelam has demonstrated, this neglect has had far-reaching political consequences, for its effect has been to deny any continuity or legitimacy to Palestinian history and to convince the guild of biblical scholars that only the history of Israel should be the proper and legitimate object of study (1996:58).

a broader level, the answer to Fish's question is much more serious, for what the text has "done" is to justify colonialism and exploitation, and to bring untold suffering to countless communities resulting, in some cases, in their virtual annihilation as a people (cf. Prior 1997:14). This is precisely why ethical critique should be an important element in the armoury of biblical scholars. What is missing from biblical scholarship is what Schüssler Fiorenza has called "*a hermeneutics of ethical and theological evaluation*" (1999:51; her italics). The challenge of reader–response criticism to the guild of biblical scholars is therefore quite clear and uncompromising: they must free themselves from that most debilitating of all inhibitions—the fear of expressing their repugnance of a biblical text. Such a clarion call to conscience may not quicken the pulse of the majority of biblical exegetes who may, perhaps, entertain serious reservations concerning the entire reader–response enterprise. It will now be necessary to consider what those reservations might be and whether they can be overcome.

The Drawbacks of the Reader–response Approach

Many will no doubt feel instinctively uneasy about applying a "hermeneutic of suspicion" to the biblical text, and may well harbour serious misgivings about the propriety of adopting a reader–response approach to the Hebrew Bible, for such a strategy seems to compromise the very essence of Scripture, reducing the transcendent, inspired word of God to the level of the human, the mundane and the ephemeral. Certainly, biblical scholars of a conservative disposition might argue that the Bible, because of its canonical status, should enjoy what J. J. Collins has termed a "presumption of transcendent value" (2005:25), which should render it immune to criticism and correction. The words and actions of God, however questionable in our own eyes, must not be subjected to critical scrutiny and judged by human standards[26]. It is not a "hermeneutic of suspicion" that the Bible demands but a "hermeneutic of consent", and the text of Scripture should be treated with reverential deference, not soiled with ideological probings. The role of the reader, according to this view, is to submit to the authority of Scripture, not to question

[26] Kaiser, for example, begins with the presumption that God is completely good, just and beyond reproach, and any divine actions or words that seem to conflict with these expectations are rationalized as good, just (in the circumstances) and necessary: "What God is in his character and what he wills in his revelation, defines what is right; conversely it is right, good, acceptable and satisfying to all because of his known character and will" (1983:3). On this basis, Kaiser is forced to concede that the Hebrew Bible upholds the justice and righteousness of God even in the command to eradicate the Canaanites (267), and he comes to the rather naïve conclusion that "God's character and the acts he requires are fully consistent with everything that both testaments would lead us to expect in our God" (269).

or criticize it, and the task of the exegete is to affirm the values embodied in the biblical text, not to repudiate or reject them.

Moreover, while there may well be some unsavoury aspects to the biblical text, these (it is argued) should not be explained away by whatever strategy happens to be in vogue among the guild of biblical scholars. After all, it may be that in another decade or so the reader–response approach will be airily dismissed as a passing fad, and a different methodology will have captured our allegiance[27]. Those who adopt the reader–response approach, it is argued, are simply in thrall to one of the transient trends of biblical scholarship, and it is by no means clear why the Bible should be left at the mercy of one of the "here today, gone tomorrow" fashions of the literary establishment.

Other scholars may feel wary of the reader–response approach, not because of any loyalty to established dogma concerning the status of the biblical text, but because they have been schooled in the dominant methodologies of historical criticism, and feel that it is simply not their task to evaluate the text or pass moral judgment on its content. Indeed, biblical scholars have often made a virtue of suppressing their ethical judgments in the firm belief that academic integrity demands that the Bible should be read with a studied neutrality. Moral adjudication, on the other hand, is necessarily subjective, reflecting the individual's personal preferences and prejudices[28], and it is easy to see how reader–response criticism can be used simply as a way to legitimate our particular ideology and predisposition. Besides, if we read the Hebrew Bible simply in order to take issue with its more unsavoury aspects, while appealing to its more positive, life-enhancing statements to confirm and corroborate values we already hold anyway, why bother reading the Bible at all? Does not reading the Bible end up in little more than an exercise in self-reflection, so that we are using Scripture (in the words of Norman Holland) merely to "replicate ourselves" (1976:342)?

Can a Reader–response Approach to the Hebrew Bible be Justified?

Scholars who feel inhibited from applying to Scripture a "hermeneutic of suspicion" because of their reverence for the Bible as a sacred text, or because

[27] In the words of W. R. Inge, quoted by Dennis Nineham, "he who marries the spirit of the age will soon find himself a widower" (Nineham 1976:109, 227).

[28] Indeed, practitioners of the reader–response approach make no pretence to disguise the subjectivity of their judgments. As Clines has remarked, "'ethical' can only mean 'ethical to me and people who think like me', and if I don't make judgments according to my own standards, according to whose standards shall I be making them, and in what sense could those judgments be *mine*?". Since there are "no absolutes, no universal standards", there are no objective grounds for preferring one view over another (1995:109).

of their doubts concerning the reader–response approach in general, may find some reassurance in the fact that the biblical authors themselves frequently exercise a critical role, questioning past beliefs and querying past judgments. Far from accepting passively the values that they had imbibed, their strategy was to probe, question, modify and even reject some of their inherited traditions. What is often overlooked is that the Hebrew Bible not only reflects the ethical and theological assumptions of its time, but frequently questions and challenges those assumptions. As Brueggemann has observed, the biblical text is "pervasively disputatious" (1997:317), and the religion of Israel was always a "probing, questioning, insisting, disjunctive faith" (318). When Abraham fears that God will slay the innocent along with the guilty of Sodom, he has the temerity to demand that God live up to the best standard according to which human justice was administered (Gen. 18:22–33; cf. Rodd 1971–2:137–9). Job similarly confronts God with the accusation that the punishment he had received was totally disproportionate to any wrongdoing which he may have committed (Job 9:13–24; 16:6–17). The Psalmists often question the essential justice of God, especially when they see wickedness unrequited or, worse still, evil seemingly rewarded with temporal prosperity (cf. Pss. 10:1–12; 73:12–14). The book of Ecclesiastes questions the breezy optimism of the sapiential tradition, and provides a radical critique of the intrinsic connection between act and consequence, and the concomitant idea of divine retribution (Eccles. 2:14–16; 3:19; 9:1–3). During the time of Malachi, the populace in general was apparently questioning the effectiveness of God as the sustainer of the moral order, believing that "all who do evil are good in the sight of the LORD", and wondering, as a result, "where is the God of justice?" (Mal. 2:17)[29]. If the traditions of ancient Israel were to remain normative and meaningful, they had to be critically appraised and had to maintain their value and relevance in the face of critical questioning. The presence in the Hebrew Bible of such "struggle-ridden texts" (Mosala 1989:27) suggests that Scripture does not require or sanction a morality of unquestioning obedience; on the contrary, they imply that God himself could be called to account and reprimanded when he fails to act according to the criteria of basic human justice. What such passages indicate is that the Hebrew Bible comes to us bearing clear traces of its own critique of tradition, and there is a real sense in which the "hermeneutic of suspicion" is deeply rooted within the biblical text itself.

Susan Niditch has argued persuasively that a powerful critique of the violence associated with warfare may be found within the Hebrew Bible, for some of the biblical authors themselves evidently felt distinctly uncomfortable with the

[29] Laytner (1990) contends that such protests against God are found in the literature of practically every period of Jewish history, from the Hebrew Bible to rabbinic texts, from medieval liturgical poetry to the Hasidic tale, and from Yiddish folksongs to post-Holocaust poetry and literature.

traditions recounting the cruelties and atrocities of war[30]. Such a critique may be seen, for example, in the way the Chronicler has edited out certain stories, such as David eliminating the lame and blind during his conquest of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6–10), and his arbitrary treatment of prisoners of war recorded in 2 Sam. 8:2 (cf. 1 Chr. 18:2). In 1 Chr. 22:6–11, David is disqualified from building the temple in Jerusalem because he was a warrior who had killed in battle; it was to be Solomon, his son, the man of peace (playing on the etymology of his name) who would be permitted to build the house of God (v.9), not the one sullied by the blood of war. In 2 Chr. 28:8–15, the Chronicler, in recounting the treatment of defeated captives, highlights God's displeasure with the folly and cruelty of war, and commends the merciful clothing and feeding of the prisoners. A similar plea for fair treatment of prisoners of war occurs in 2 Kgs 6:20–23, and a powerful critique of the intolerable aspects of warring behaviour is encountered in the oracles against the foreign nations in Am. 1:3–2:3. In addition to a critique of warfare in general, Niditch argues that there is also an implicit criticism of aspects of the "holy war" tradition in the Hebrew Bible. By regarding the "ban" as a form of sacrifice to the deity, Niditch suggests that the biblical authors were trying to abdicate human responsibility for the killing (1993:136). Hosea's condemnation of Jehu's excess (Hos. 1:4) may be regarded as a "criticism of ban-like activities" (1993:136), and in the holy war carried out against the Midianites, the severity of the "ban" is to some extent mitigated by the injunction that virgin girls were to be spared (Num. 31:17–18)[31]. The evidence at our disposal would seem to suggest that the biblical authors do "worry about the ethics of killing in war and make peace with themselves in various ways"[32].

Now the presence in Scripture of such critical questioning may be regarded as a sanction for our own moral critique of the Hebrew Bible[33]. By reading

[30] Niditch 1993:136–7. Prior (1997:229 n.11, 263) points to some passages in the Hebrew Bible which reveal a sense of guilt and remorse at the occupation of a land that originally belonged to others (Josh. 24:13; cf. 1 Macc. 15:33–34). For the general critique of war in antiquity, see Bainton 1961:22–26.

[31] Niditch (1993:137) suggests that the fact that "guilt offerings" were to be presented to God after the war against the Midianites (Num. 31) perhaps suggests an element of compunction regarding the almost complete annihilation of the enemy.

[32] Niditch 1993:21. Rodd denies that there is a critique of war in the Hebrew Bible, but this is based on his misguided assumption that issues such as war were viewed as a normal fact of life in ancient Israel and were not therefore regarded as a problem which needed to be critiqued. Indeed, Rodd insists that since many issues which would be considered by us as ethically highly-charged were regarded by the people of Israel as a matter of course, "it would have been astonishing if any major features of the culture had been challenged" (2001:272). This statement is itself astonishing, given the constant critique of ethical perspectives that is encountered in the Hebrew Bible. Far nearer the mark is the observation by Brueggemann: "On every religious question the matter is under dispute, and we frequently are able to identify the several voices to the adjudication that are sounded in the text" (1997:64).

[33] As Birch and Rasmussen have remarked, "that the biblical communities themselves can be seen judging and reinterpreting and measuring the tradition against their own experience

the Bible in a probing, questioning manner, we may find ourselves acting in harmony with the biblical writers themselves and conducting an exercise of which they would be the first to approve. As Moyise has observed, justification for reading "against the grain" of the text may be found in the fact that the Bible itself provides the tools for critiquing its own content, so that what we are doing is similar to what the biblical authors themselves did (2004:106). Applying the reader–response approach to the text of Scripture is therefore not to introduce an alien principle into biblical interpretation; rather, it is a way of interpreting the Bible in its own terms. Since an ethical critique of Scripture can be justified on inner-biblical grounds, applying a "hermeneutic of suspicion" to the text should not be viewed as a sign of disrespect for the Bible; what is disrespectful is to gloss over its unwholesome aspects, and to assume "that it will say what we would like it to say" (Clines 1995:192).

Furthermore, it could be argued that an ethical critique of the Hebrew Bible is not only possible but unavoidable, for even a cursory reading reveals that it exhibits many different—and even conflicting—moral norms which inevitably require some form of ethical adjudication[34]. In the prophetic and legal material, in the psalms and the wisdom literature, we find a wide variety of approaches to some of the social issues of the day. One could easily point to texts that appear to condone polygamy and capital punishment, and to other texts that seem to oppose such practices. Sometimes the internal contradictions in the biblical material are perfectly obvious and self-evident, but often such incongruities have to be teased out of the text by means of a sophisticated process which involves exposing elements that the text tries to suppress[35]. Feminist biblical critics, for example, have tried to reconstruct the remains of antithetical undercurrents—what Schüssler Fiorenza calls "subversive memory" (1984:19)—within the biblical text which call in question the dominance of patriarchy and the traditional understanding of gender relations[36]. An analysis of the moral teaching of the Hebrew Bible would be comparatively easy if it provided a coherent and consistent system of ethical thought, but the fact is that there are discordant voices within Scripture, and readers are placed in a

of God can be read as a support for similar activity on our part" (1989:174). Phyllis Trible defends her process of "depatriarchalizing" the biblical text on the basis that it was a "hermeneutic operating within Scripture itself" (1973:48). Ruether similarly argues that in applying to the text of the Hebrew Bible a "hermeneutic of suspicion", feminist biblical criticism merely "continues the process of Scriptural hermeneutic itself" (1985:122).

[34] As Gunn and Fewell have observed, the Bible "shows us not merely patriarchy, élitism, and nationalism; it shows us the fragility of these ideologies through irony and counter-voices" (1993:204).

[35] Brueggemann compares this process to Freud's understanding of the interpretation of dreams in that it involves looking for what is repressed, hidden, denied or buried beneath the surface (1997:327).

[36] Cosgrove refers to these as "countercultural" witnesses within Scripture, that is, tendencies in the text that go against the dominant normative values and ideology of the society in which it was produced (2002:90–115). See, also, Pardes 1992.

position where they must often choose between competing claims. Thus, the Bible demands that some texts be critiqued in the light of others, and in this way every reader of Scripture becomes, of necessity, his or her own ethical critic.

Finally, the issue of "critique" requires further clarification, for there is a danger that it will be understood in a predominantly negative sense, and that the entire reader–response enterprise will consequently be regarded as a futile exercise. Such a criticism would be entirely justified were we to allow our critique of Scripture to be one-sided, and fail to appreciate the fact that our questioning of the Hebrew Bible should set in train a dialectical process whereby the Bible also questions us, inviting us to reconsider our priorities, to revise our long-cherished beliefs, and perhaps to re-orient our deeply entrenched ethical positions. When ancient text and modern reader are brought into mutual conversation with one another the world we knew (or thought we knew) may be reconfigured, and our conventional ways of thinking may be overturned. Passages in the prophets, for example, might unsettle our views concerning the notions of justice and equality; the flaws we perceive in the social institutions reflected in the Hebrew Bible may lead us to see the defects and deficiencies in our own contemporary society; the shortcomings we detect in the ethical values of the ancient Israelites may encourage us to reflect on the adequacy of our own beliefs and practices. Cross-cultural judgments must go in both directions, so that as we pass judgment on the Bible we must allow the Bible to pass judgment on us. In this way, an encounter with the past is transformed into an encounter with the present, and we will often find that the Bible we thought we had under cross-examination has turned the tables and begun to interrogate us. Such a reading of the Bible can prove to be a most humbling experience, for all too often we have an overweening trust in the rectitude of our own judgment and in the superiority of our own perspective, and such intellectual arrogance often shields us from self-criticism and self-evaluation. Reading the Hebrew Bible as a resisting reader, far from being a negative exercise, may prove to be a transformative experience in which our own fundamental beliefs and values are called in question.

Conclusion

The reader–response approach recognizes that, while there are undoubtedly passages in Scripture that are uplifting and life-enhancing, there are also many passages that are morally offensive and ethically questionable. The strategy insists that, as we contemplate the ethically dubious passages of the Hebrew Bible, we must learn to become what Judith Fetterley has termed "resisting readers". Just as we might readily concede that parts of the Hebrew Bible are scientifically or historically wrong, so we must be prepared to pronounce that

parts of it are *morally* wrong. It is not enough simply to excise such passages from Scripture, or to relegate them to some inferior stage of Israel's development, or dismiss them as out of symmetry with the more palatable parts of Israel's faith and ethics. Rather, the morally offensive passages of the Hebrew Bible, such as Josh. 6–11, must be questioned and critiqued in an open, honest and forthright way.

Reader–response criticism, however, invites us to critique not only the biblical text itself, but the way in which it has been understood and interpreted by biblical exegetes. Our examination of the way in which biblical commentators have broached the account of the conquest of Canaan and its justification in the Hebrew Bible revealed that, by and large, scholars tended to align themselves with the dominant voice of the text, and their general approach to the biblical tradition was far more likely to be consensual rather than critical. They tended to adopt the ideology of the text uncritically, and accept the biblical view that the indigenous population of Canaan was basically immoral, corrupt and lacking the ethical impulse of Yahwism. What was particularly striking was the pusillanimous reluctance of many commentators to engage in ethical critique of the relevant passages, even though the texts in question depicted killing, destruction and horrendous suffering on a mass scale. If the ethical issue was addressed at all by commentators, it was usually done in the most perfunctory way; indeed, it was almost a novelty to encounter a commentary that subjected the ethically problematic passages of Josh. 6–11 to serious and sustained moral critique.

The argument of the present chapter, however, is that there must be a place in biblical scholarship—and a respectable and honourable place—for moral critique and ethical appraisal of the biblical tradition. For why should it be regarded as respectable to undertake a critical evaluation of the sources of the Hebrew Bible but not of its morality? Why should the categories of "truth" and "falsehood" be so readily applied to the historical statements of the Hebrew Bible but not to its value judgments? It is vital that "ethical criticism" be placed firmly on the agenda of the university curriculum, and that the biblical exegete be prepared to tackle what may perhaps be the most important task of the biblical interpreter, namely, that of interacting with the text and reflecting consciously and critically upon the validity or otherwise of its claims.

Clearly, ethical criticism has yet to make its full impact on the realm of biblical studies, and it must be conceded that the application of reader–response criticism to the Hebrew Bible is not without its problems. In the first place, the transition from the historical-critical to the literary-critical approach is not one that many biblical scholars will find particularly easy or congenial. The interests of literary theorists seem alien to the traditional interests of biblical scholars, and many will probably balk at the importation of a methodology that seems so new and unfamiliar. Others may resist such an approach out of deference for the Bible, believing that we cannot question the normative

value of its statements without impugning its authority as the Scripture of the church.

While we cannot pretend to have effectively eviscerated all criticisms of the reader–response approach to the biblical text, we have attempted to defend the use of this strategy by arguing that a critique of tradition is authorized by the Hebrew Bible itself, and can thus be justified on inner-biblical grounds. Susan Niditch has argued that there is a critique of violence and brutality within the Hebrew Bible itself, and that the biblical writers occasionally felt distinctly uncomfortable with the traditions recounting the cruelties and atrocities of war. There is a sense, therefore, in which Scripture itself provides a warrant for modern readers to probe its values, to question its assumptions, and to dissent from its teachings. By applying the reader–response approach to the biblical material we are merely continuing ancient Israel's own debate regarding the validity of its ethical norms. Such an approach does not derogate from the authority of Scripture; on the contrary, it merely continues a process encountered within the Hebrew Bible itself, for the biblical authors themselves often assumed a critical, dissociating position with regard to the traditions which they inherited.

Moreover, it was argued that the conflicting perspectives on various issues in Scripture inevitably require some form of ethical adjudication by the reader. The Hebrew Bible is replete with assertions and counter-assertions and, faced with what Brueggemann has called the "conflictual, disputatious quality of Old Testament articulation" (1997:73), we are often placed in a position in which we are forced to decide between the competing claims of Scripture. The text of the Hebrew Bible is "internally argumentative" (Levenson 1993:56), and readers must sometimes choose between seemingly irreconcilable options. But whereas the discordant voices of Scripture are often viewed as a problem, it may be that they can serve as a way of resolving a problem, for the dialogue and debate within the Hebrew Bible may provide a useful starting-point for our own approach to the ethically dubious passages of Scripture. The presence of a plurality of contradictory voices within the Hebrew Bible forces us to make our own decisions, and in the process we become, of necessity, our own ethical critics.

We have been at pains to emphasize, however, that reader–response criticism should not be viewed as an unduly negative approach to the Bible, for it is not intended to be a destructive negation of the values embedded in Scripture; rather, it is a strategy that invites us to engage in continual dialogue with the ethical judgments which it enshrines, and, in the process, we may find our own deeply-held and long-cherished views being questioned or adjusted. As Schüssler Fiorenza has remarked, the Bible "invites transformations" (1985:135), and provided we read the biblical text in a spirit of humility and open-mindedness, we may find ourselves being changed in the process.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

In this volume, we have been concerned to examine some of the strategies deployed by biblical scholars over the years to overcome the ethically problematic passages of Scripture. The very existence of such texts within the canon has led some to question the value, importance and authority of the Hebrew Bible, and to wonder why it should be accepted and affirmed as a foundation for faith. After all, how could a book in which polygamy, slavery, xenophobia and homophobia are openly advocated be relied upon as an infallible and inerrant source of ethical guidance for contemporary communities of faith? Modern readers of the Hebrew Bible cannot simply overlook what the Israelites did (or claimed to have done) to the Canaanites, nor can they ignore the appalling litany of murder and violence found within its pages. Clearly, *some* strategy has to be devised in order to counter the ethically problematic passages of Scripture, otherwise the Hebrew Bible, far from providing sound moral guidance, may well turn out to be "an ethical millstone around the neck of the Christian Church" (Davidson 1959: 373).

The first strategy discussed was the so-called "evolutionary approach", which can be traced back to the latter decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. During this period, evolution and progress had become very much the order of the day, and for many biblical scholars the evolutionary theory provided the most plausible means of explaining away passages of Scripture that might offend the sensitive conscience. The revolution in the historical-critical method during the nineteenth century meant that a development could be discerned in the Bible's ethical understanding, and the morally unpalatable parts of the Hebrew Bible could be put down to the partial gropings and misconceptions of earlier ages. It stood to reason that divine commands that may have appeared immoral or subversive to later, more enlightened, sensibilities would have been inevitable in Israel at a less developed stage in the nation's moral progress. Such an understanding of the way in which the history of Israel developed provided a welcome strategy for dealing with the accounts of violence and brutality recorded in the Hebrew Bible. It was pointed out that most of the endorsements of violent behaviour were set in the context of the early history of Israel, and reflected the vestiges of a primitive religion which was transcended in later Judaism and Christianity. The merciless slaughter of the Canaanites, for example, belonged to an

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