

***Deuteronomy, Jewish Prophets and the Sermon on the Mount:
Moral Formulas, Comedy and Tragedy:
Monophony or Polyphony?***

The Classical Hebrew canon tends to be divided, for the purposes of classification, into the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. *Deuteronomy* is the final book of the Law, and the text articulates and threads together the Jewish political vision as the Jewish people are about to cross the Jordan into the much anticipated and longed for promised land. There is a very real sense in which *Deuteronomy* is the 1st political manifesto written in the West (centuries before such western classics of political philosophy by Plato and Aristotle), and in this manifesto, an ethical, liturgical and distinctive political agenda is clearly articulated. The Jewish nation is offered a blueprint in *Deuteronomy* for both domestic and foreign policy issues. Moses seems to be the lawgiver for most of the book, and Moses' enhanced and enlarged view of the Jewish framework for running their new society cannot be missed. *Deuteronomy* merely means the second laws, the larger economic, social and political laws that were meant to build on the Decalogue (10 Commandments) and the Shema ('Love the Lord Your God with All Your Heart, Soul, Strength and Mind'). The Shema and Decalogue are foundational to the Jewish tradition, and, in many ways, don't raise the tensions that the larger history and 2nd set of laws entails. Let us now turn to the tensions.

Those who take the time to sit with the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament cannot but be taken by a trying tension and problematic dilemma. The problem is, at a primary level, theological. God is, at times, merciful, just, longsuffering, generous, fatherly, shepherd-like and compassionate. God is, at other times, angry, brutal, warlike and destructive. It's often difficult to know which aspect of God will appear at what time and why. God seems no different from Zeus, Odin or Jupiter in his warlike and hawkish tendencies at places in the textual narrative. This has raised serious concerns and questions for those who take the Bible with some level of seriousness. Is God truly a consistent and good God, or does God's willing and actions trump his goodness? These tensions have been duly noted by many thoughtful exegetes of the Hebrew canon. Peter Craigie's, [*The Problem of War in the Old Testament*](#) (1978), Eric Seibert's [*Disturbing Divine Behaviour: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*](#) (2009) and Simone Weil's [*Letter to a Priest*](#) (1942) are but three classics that probe and ponder this difficulty. It is this perennial tension that the well-known Canadian theologian and philosopher, George Grant, grappled with much of his life. If God's ways are above our ways, can God do anything and humans have no right to question Divine behavior? If God is beyond good and evil, does this mean that God can use unjust and immoral means to achieve a Divine end? There are many passages in the Old Testament that seem to suggest this might be the case. Many of these questions and issues are expressed clearly and poignantly in *Deuteronomy*; hence to *Deuteronomy* we now turn to explore the ethical implications of such Divine behaviour.

Deuteronomy was written as a political manifesto for the Jews as they were about to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. The broader and fuller ethical vision of

Deuteronomy goes well beyond the ‘Shema’ and the Decalogue. Moses is the recipient of God’s guidance for a national people who are chosen by God with a unique and special destiny. This is made abundantly clear by Moses again and again in his final vision to be handed on to the Jewish people. But, in this manifesto, all the seeds are sown for the conflict that will raise serious questions about God and the Jewish nation in its unfolding journey. There are two traditions at work in *Deuteronomy*, and the remainder of the Hebrew canon is torn between which tradition will dominate, when and why. There is the nationalist tradition that legitimates any sort of Divine and Jewish behaviour, and there is the prophetic tradition that raises the ethical bar to a higher level. It is in this clash between the nationalist and prophetic traditions within Biblical Judaism that different paths are taken both in the Jewish past and contemporary Jewish life in Israel (by both secular and orthodox Jews and Christian Zionists). The secular Jewish state and the Christian Zionist movement emerge from the nationalist tradition, whereas the Jewish prophetic tradition exists also in the Bible and modern Jewish and Christian thought. Let us touch on how these traditions in tension collide in *Deuteronomy*.

The Jewish prophetic tradition as found in *Deuteronomy* has much to commend it. The ethical standards are high and worthy of emulation. Judges are not supposed to show partiality between Jew and alien (1:15-18 & 16:18-20), and in the Decalogue (5:1-21) murder, theft and many other questionable practices are opposed. The Jews are warned about going to war with certain tribes (2: 5, 9, 18), and the aliens, fatherless and widows are meant to be provided for at a basic material level (14:28-29). The Jewish nation is expected to be generous with the bounty of their land (15:1-11) and servants are to be freed from bondage to their masters (15:12-18). The King is expected to live a life of integrity (17:14-20); and cities of refuge are provided for those that have unintentionally killed someone (19:9-10). Even innocent and young birds are to be cared for (22:6), and again the foreigner and fatherless are to be warmly tended to (26: 12-14). Work conditions are to be just for both Jew and alien (24:14-22), and in the final section on ‘curses’, the passage goes like this: ‘Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow’ (27:19). The section on ‘curses’ (27) speaks firmly and soundly about theological, familial, property, economic, community and sexual issues. There is no doubt when reading through the major social concerns in the covenant that God is making with the Jewish people that there is a lofty and demanding ethic. It is these commands, decrees, laws and stipulations that, if heeded and followed, will bring peace, prosperity and plenty to the Jewish people. There is, in short, an ethic on the personal and public level that has universal implications. Those who are drawn to this ethic cannot but be confused when a more nationalistic and narrower moral position is also part of *Deuteronomy*.

The nationalistic and more racist ethic can be most worrisome, and it is quite legitimate to question whether it is God passing on such a way of life. There are, in short, immense ethical contradictions within *Deuteronomy* that cannot but create a sort of intellectual dissonance for those that dare to ponder the dilemma. The earlier passages that hold high peace collide with a hawkish notion of an aggressive and genocidal approach to war (2:24-37 & 3: 1-11).

We are informed, on the one hand, that God has hardened the heart of Sihon against the Jews, and, on the other hand, because of his hardness of heart, the Jews are to wipe out (men, women and children—no survivors left) Sihon and tribe. The same treatment (another genocide of gruesome proportions) is to be inflicted on Og, King of Bashan and his people. How is it possible to reconcile the command not to kill in the Decalogue with the wanton and violent destruction of another people? The Decalogue also commands the Jews not to steal, but the crossing of the Jordan and the military taking of another culture's land is a form of theft and stealing. How is it possible to hold high the notion of not murdering and stealing yet being told by God to both murder and steal? The contradiction and dilemma cannot be missed. The genocidal attitude is yet further developed in the book (7:16). The Jews are told not to intermarry (7:3 & 21:10-14)), and yet Moses did not marry a Jewish woman, and he consulted a priest of Midian (Jethro) who was not Jewish. Although Abraham is seen as the father and patriarch of the Jews, Abraham was blessed by Melchizedek (a non-Jew). The Jews are encouraged to drive out other nations in an aggressive manner (11:22-25, 29 & 25:17-19), and the death penalty is exacted for a variety of reasons (13:8-9, 13:15, 17:5-7, 17:12, 18:20). The show no pity, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot (19:21) injunction does run contrary to a merciful, patient and longsuffering God. The Jews are told not to sacrifice their children like other nations (12:31 & 18:10), and yet they are quite willing to slaughter other children under the obedient banner of a theocratic nationalism. It is somewhat contradictory to oppose the way a foreign culture sacrifices its children in worship to its view of god, and yet do the same thing in obedience to the Jewish God. There are also obvious points in *Deuteronomy* where the Jew is to care for the Jew first and foremost and the foreigner and alien in a less just manner (14:21 & 23:19-20).

It is essential to note, by way of winding down Moses' commands, that he made it clear that if the Jews were true and faithful to the injunctions, commands and decrees given, good would emerge, but if they violated the commands given, they would go into exile. Moses had no doubts about the fact that the Jews would ignore the injunctions offered, hence there would be serious consequences to face (28-29). Such a tale is starkly recounted in the prophetic books in the Hebrew canon, and, in a more updated form, in Daniel Berrigan's *The Kings and Their Gods: the Pathology of Power* (2008). The historical tale of the Jewish people is well recounted in their historic books: *1-2 Samuel*, *1-2 Kings*, *1-2 Chronicles*. Berrigan has poignantly unpacked, in a prophetic manner, the tensions between the nationalist and prophetic dynamics within Biblical Judaism in such poetic classics as *Uncommon Prayer: A Book of Psalms* (1978), *Daniel: Under the Siege of the Divine* (1998) and *The Kings and Their Gods*. There is a great deal of affinity between Berrigan's Christian and Roman Catholic prophetic vision and the Jewish standard prophetic books by Martin Buber and Abraham Heschel: *The Prophetic Faith* and *The Prophets*. Needless to say, Berrigan's, Buber's and Heschel's understandings of the prophetic way have little to do with 'end times' speculations and an uncritical support for the secular state of Israel and Christian Zionism.

There is a false sentiment within Christian and Jewish Zionism that seems to assume the Jews cannot be criticized for their behavior, but most of the Jewish Bible is a sustained criticism by the prophets of the fact the Jewish people are not true to the ideals given

them by Moses. It is somewhat ironic that those who claim the Jewish nation has a right to the land fail to see that the right to the land is contingent on heeding the ethical vision given to them by God. The tale and drama of the Hebrew canon is one of constantly going into exile for the simple reason the decrees were not followed. The true spirit of Judaism is prophetic, and at the heart of the prophetic is the willingness to question and deconstruct the false gods and hypocritical ideals of a people. When this is not done, the Bible is distorted and misused to serve 'the pathology of power' that Berrigan has so well described in *The Kings and Their Gods*.

But, we have a problem in making sense of all this. Will the prophetic or nationalist traditions of Judaism prevail? Those who attempt to embrace both traditions inevitably face trying contradictions that cannot be resolved. They also become agents of a tragic support of injustice and brutality at a variety of levels. There are many more points I could raise that highlight the differences between the prophetic and nationalist impulses in *Deuteronomy*, but it is in these unresolved and, in some ways, irreconcilable differences that two types of both Judaism and the Christian read of the Jewish tradition emerge.

The nationalist and prophetic traditions are often pitted against one another in the Hebrew tradition, but the major voice within Biblical Judaism is the prophetic. It tends to stand firm, consistent and vocal against the nationalist tendency. The oral, minor and major prophets never flinched nor were silent on the larger peace, justice and ecological issues. *Amos, Jonah and Hosea* to name but three Minor Prophets hold high the best of the Mosaic ethical vision. *Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel* make it abundantly clear that justice must be at the centre and core of the Jewish way, and when worship or textual exegesis, life style or spiritual searching do not place feet firm on the soil of compassion and justice, then religion becomes a diversionary opiate. It is the Jewish prophets who interpret the Mosaic decrees in a way that clearly separates the vicious and warlike, genocidal and hawkish god of the nationalists from the God of nations and peoples who longs for all to come to the New Jerusalem, where the gates are always open.

Most of the historic books within the Hebrew canon tell the same tale again and again. The Kings and their courtiers assume God, Nation and Kingship are the trinity that cannot be doubted or questioned. God has chosen the Jewish people, given them land, and His face will shine on them. But, the prophets beg to differ with this unholy threefold alliance. If the language of God is used to legitimate unjust treatment of Jews or other peoples, God's name is being used in vain and a form of idolatry is in the making. The Jewish prophets made it clear many times that the Jews were in exile to the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Medes and Persians because of their lack of faithfulness to the ethical core given by Moses. This was also the reason the 12 Tribes were divided into the northern and southern kingdoms. The saddest and most affluent form of Jewish nationalism was lived through in the Solomonic period. The distortions of the Mosaic tradition are duly recorded and recounted, in an updated version, in Brueggemann's [*The Prophetic Imagination*](#) and Berrigan's *The Kings and Their Gods*. Solomon sowed the seeds of the dissolution of the Jewish people by his indulgent life style that was the opposite of the life of Moses and all he endured for the Jewish people.

There is, though, the fact we need to linger and ponder the larger moral and formulaic framework even of the Jewish prophetic ethos and vision. Does history reveal a close relationship between prosperity, health and wealth flowing from prophetic goodness and, eventually, sad and painful consequences the inevitable lived reality of those who are narcissistic, mediocre or patently evil? There is, of course, some truth in such a way of seeing and being, but when such an interpretive grid dominates, substantive distortion of reality becomes an unhealthy norm. Those who ignore the tragic dimensions in life in their thinking must face dire consequences for doing so. The theological and philosophical history of those who have stepped beyond mere formulaic approaches to the tragic question is where a more mature place of thinking must begin and end. A more in-depth dialogue between the prophetic and tragic is a portal one and all must pass through to approach the more honest and demanding questions and issues of our all-too-human journey.

I was fortunate, many decades ago, when doing undergraduate studies, to immerse myself in Greek and Shakespearian tragedies. The latter novels of Thomas Hardy and the American West Coast poet, Robinson Jeffers, never flinched from living into the tragic. Albert Camus went to places in his probes on the tragic few have done. I almost did a PHD on Walter Kaufmann in the 1980s, and his superb tome, [*Tragedy and Philosophy*](#), is a must read for those committed to such a journey. The much respected Christian theologian, Donald MacKinnon, has faced into this issue with utmost honesty as has his former student, the recent Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

There is, to turn the corner somewhat, no whiff of a nationalist odor in the Beatitudes and Sermon of the Mount of Jesus. The Beatitudes clearly sum up the Jewish prophetic tradition in a succinct and compact manner. The warrior god is gone, eye for eye has disappeared, caring for the enemy takes front stage, and Jesus chooses to suffer ill and death rather than inflict it on others. It is in his resurrection that God in the flesh embodies, incarnates and articulates a new kingdom that is summarized in the Lord's Prayer. But, we must note, and this must be noted, that in the Christian commitment to the resurrection of Jesus (John the Baptist, many Jewish prophets and early Christian martyrs did not have the same fate) comedy trumps tragedy. This has led, wrongly so, certain types of Christians to laud the comedic and marginalize the tragic. Such an approach distorts both the human journey through time and an interpretation of it. We need, in most ways, to ponder the tensions between the tragic and comedic, Dante and Greek tragedy, Shakespeare and his tragi-comedies or comedic-tragedies.

In conclusion, the Jewish tradition can move in different directions: prophetic or nationalist. These tendencies are in *Deuteronomy*. The Jewish prophets who followed Moses sifted the wheat from the chaff, the gold from the dross of the prophetic and nationalists impulses. We must, though, avoid the immature danger of accepting the notion that, at root, the nationalist and prophet visions offer simplistic moral formulas for interpreting the oft unpredictable and incomprehensible mysteries and tragedies of life. Jesus stood firmly on the shoulders of the Jewish prophets in both his life and teachings in the Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount (and this is certainly a higher ethic than the

varieties of Jewish nationalism or Christian Zionism). The sad thing is that most Christians today are more indebted to the Jewish nationalist perspective than the Jewish prophetic tradition. It is as Christians immerse themselves, in thought, word and deed, in the Sermon on the Mount that a genuine Christian prophetic ethos (with its tragic-comedic tensions) will be nurtured and emerge. There is, in short, a deeper polyphonic symphony of sorts that needs be heeded rather than a simplistic monophonic approach if the Jewish-Christian tradition is going to take deeper dives and emerge with richer pearls of great price. Surely we need flares sent up in our time by those who have dared to bring forth light from such darker and deeper places in an age when most Christians continue to bow the knee to a new form of Constantinianism.

Amor Vincit Omnia
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