

**Keith Watkins**

## **Giving the Hebrew Bible Another Read**

### **Comments Prompted by Yoram Hazony's *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture***

About twenty years ago, when I was in my early 60s and dealing with mild depression, I decided that it finally was time to read straight through the Bible, beginning with Genesis 1:1 and finishing at some later date with Revelation 22:21. I got as far as Judges. The bloody narratives, many of them describing actions incited by the warrior God of the conquering Hebrews, were more than my flagging spirit could manage. Although I continue to read from the New Testament, especially the letters of Paul, the gospels, and Acts, it is as though the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures in my personal Bible are pasted together. Will *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) by a highly acclaimed young Israeli scholar, I am wondering, help me start over with the thirty-nine writings of my Bible?

Yoram Hazony, provost and senior scholar at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, believes that the texts of Hebrew Scripture are best read as “works of reason or philosophy.” The question of whether this can be done, he says, in the next to last paragraph of the Appendix, takes this form: “Do they engage in the effort to derive and make known to us the general causes or natures of the things encountered in human experience? Are these general natures used in attempts to establish principles or laws of general applicability concerning the world of our experience? And do these find application in particular instances, or to substantiate the truth of the principles and laws in question” (p. 273)?

In the final paragraph, Hazony states the one premise upon which he bases his constructive argument: “As soon as one recognizes, as I have suggested, that metaphor, analogy, and typology are in fact means by which the author of a work can establish positions with respect to general causes or natures, it becomes easier to see

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that the great majority of the biblical authors, and perhaps all of them, are indeed engaged in reason; and that it is the exercise of reason, which we find almost everywhere in the Hebrew Bible, that I've sought to depict in my inquiries into the ethics, political philosophy, epistemology, metaphysics, and faith of the Hebrew Scriptures as presented in Part II of this work" (p. 264).

Hazony believes, however, that the Hebrew Scriptures do not receive the respect they deserve from readers today, especially those with recognized competence in philosophy. Much of the book, therefore, is devoted to describing and counteracting the reasons why the ancient writings of his people are dismissed as works of reason.

One of these reasons is cited above, the form of these writings. They abound with references to the words and actions of God, which for many readers make them into works of mythology or divine revelation, incapable of being read as serious works of reason. Hazony quickly dismisses this argument by showing how many of these same skeptical readers seem not to be troubled by the obviously mythological format of Greek and Roman treatises that they acclaim as among the most important works of reason in the history of human thought. If Greek writings can be read as works of reason despite their mythological format, he insists, then writings in similar form in other traditions, including the Hebrew, can also be read philosophically.

Far more important in Hazony's explanation for this lack of respect is what he alleges is the misreading of Hebrew Scripture by Christians and the baleful effect this prejudicial attitude has had on the Western intellectual tradition. According to Hazony, Christians divide religious writings into two categories: reason and revelation. Revelation comes directly from God and is to be accepted as given. In contrast, reason is a human construct, always subject to error, always inferior to revelation. Even if one were to agree with this distinction, Hazony counters, this dialectic is irrelevant to the proper understanding of Hebrew Scripture. These documents were written prior to the emergence of the reason-revelation dichotomy in the Western intellectual tradition.

Hazony pays special attention to one element of what he understands to be standard Christian understandings of truth. He identifies Tertullian (b. 155 CE) as the early Christian leader who codified what became the standard Christian position. According to this Carthaginian church leader, "the faith of a Christian and the philosopher's pursuit of truth are seen as irreconcilable and mutually antagonistic." Hazony points to three aspects of Tertullian's position that he believes are "especially significant: ... first, his adoption of an authoritative catechism by means of which a Christian can gain access to needful knowledge; second, his disavowal of the worth of a life devoted to seeking truth; and third, his endorsement of the idea that what a Christian is called upon to believe is in some sense absurd, and therefore antithetical to reason" (p. 221).

Although Hazony readily describes Tertullian as a fanatic, he shows how a similar point of view continues into recent time and uses C. S. Lewis as an example. Hazony's conclusion is clear: "It is this recurring trope, according to which Christian faith requires belief in things that are repugnant to human reason, that permits contemporary commentators to speak of Scripture as though it purposely stands in opposition to the dictates of human reason" (p. 225).

As if this theological development in orthodox Christian theology were not in itself sufficient reason for misunderstanding the Hebrew Scripture, Hazony argues that much of the modern intellectual establishment has used this argument against Christians. He writes that Enlightenment thought, especially as it took root in German universities, understood the Bible as superstition and faith rather than truth. Nothing good could come from the Bible. At a later stage, this argument was used against Christians as well as against Jews. It is, in its core, anti-Semitic.

In general, I find myself not drawn to Hazony's line of thought. His polemical tone seems unnecessary, and his treatment of Christian understandings of Hebrew Scripture, while it may describe one widely held view, is not held by large blocs of Christians around the world. More important is the fact that he does not address the aspect of Hebrew Scripture (mentioned above) that has most troubled me. Even when he exegetes the Abraham-Isaac-rab story, his defense of Abraham and God strikes me as being little better than the straight reading of it that I learned as a child. The way God is portrayed in the prophetic writings, with divine wrath as a primary mode of securing compliance with the divine plan, remains largely untouched in this book.

There are aspects of Hazony's discussion, however, that catch my attention. Interesting, but not really useful to me, is the distinction he draws between the ethics of a shepherd and the ethics of a farmer. He traces the apparent divine preference for a shepherd's way of life to the Cain and Abel story and continues it throughout Hebrew history as it appears in the books of the Hebrew Bible. Hazony is persuaded that the idea is one example of the serious effort by the ancient Jewish writers to present general ideas intended for application to all people everywhere.

An idea that may be useful to me is Hazony's organization of the thirty-nine books in the Hebrew Bible. *The History of Israel*, which consists of the first half of the Hebrew Bible, beginning with the creation of the world in Genesis, focuses attention upon the emergence of the people of Israel, and concludes with "the rise and fall of the independent state established by this people" (p. 35). Hazony refers to various theories about the composition of the books in this section, but his primary interest is in the end of the process when they were brought together as a unified corpus. "Since the text ends with the exile of Judah's leading political and spiritual figures, the most straightforward reading is that this history is the product of the exile from the land and its aftermath." Since it "knows nothing" about the return (around 538 BCE, this "History, then, is written—as the rabbis of the Talmud suggested—as

though its final author, who put it in the form in which we now have it, were Jeremiah or some other great intellectual figure among the Jews during the first decades of the exile" (p. 37). Hazony, who wrote his Rutgers Ph.D. dissertation on Jeremiah, thinks that this preeminent Hebrew writer or one of his students "may have been the final author of the History of Israel as a unified work" (p. 161). In order to understand the Hebrew Bible in such a unified manner, however, readers have to discount the large body of scholarship that insists on viewing the various parts as distinctive in origin, intention, and meaning.

*Orations of the Prophets:* These writings, which occupy the third quarter of the Hebrew Scriptures, consist of three major works—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—and twelve minor works, which with the exception of Jonah, consist largely of prophetic orations. The primary use of the Hebrew word for prophet (*navi*), Hazony writes, is "with reference to a tradition of orators in Israel and Judah who made use of public speeches to challenge abuses of power and misguided policies on the part of the kings of Israel, the priesthood, and other officials of the state, and to argue for the improvement of morals and religious practices among the people" (p. 39). He dates the books in this section from 750 BCE (Amos) to the 510s BCE, "a generation before the composition of the prophetic poems of Parmenides and Empedocles." Isaiah, he writes, "is the first great masterwork." He presented "the first extended attempts by the prophets to develop an understanding of the mechanisms by which evil befalls nations, and to advance a systematic critique of Israelite political and religious practices in light of the lessons of the downfall of Israel" (40).

*The Writings:* Three principal works—Psalms, Proverbs, and Job—are placed at the front, with lesser works trailing thereafter. Hazony notes that this final section of the book does not present a unified theme like the other sections of the Hebrew Bible.

After presenting this structural analysis of the Hebrew Bible, Hazony draws conclusions that might also be useful in New Testament exegesis. "To understand the Hebrew Bible, then, is first to recognize it as an artful compendium. Whose purpose is not—and never was—to present a single viewpoint." There is, he continues, a "center of the biblical teaching," but it "must be sought," and it is presented "by the way of a family or a school of viewpoints." This pattern of approaching truth from various perspectives is, in part, "the result of the fundamentally political character of the biblical corpus. Having been assembled to embrace and heal a broken people after the loss of its land and freedom, the Hebrew Bible could not afford the parochialism of a narrow religious sect, because it was consciously assembled to serve as the basis for the thought of an entire nation" (41). The orations function as critical commentaries on the history that is presented in the first half of the Hebrew Bible.

Hazony devotes a chapter to discussing how the Hebrew Bible makes arguments of a general nature. At the center of his argument is the priority of narrative structure, and with the stories so presented that it is not clear what the writer

thinks about the details of the story. This may be the basis for Hazony's apparent lack of interest in the morally offensive character of many of the stories, and of God's character and will as they are portrayed in portions of Hebrew Scripture. The narratives, including the speech and actions of God, are important because of their capacity to develop the general ideas which for Hazony are the reasons why these writings are important. These stories are treated much as John Dominic Crossan in his recent book on parables by and about Jesus uses historical narratives as the carriers of meaning that transcends these stories.

The Hebrew Bible's principle mode of presenting general ideas, Hazony writes, is "the construction of schemes of concepts based on contrasting character types" (74). The major example is the contrast that begins with Cain and Abel, who represent two types: Cain, the ethics of the farmer and of settled societies; and Abel, the ethics of the shepherd and of nomadic societies. Other techniques include the "repetition of events across widely scattered intervals in the narrative." The third technique is "the repetition of a certain phrase or word-combination to create a kind of technical language for the expression of precise general concepts" (78). Examples include, "Here I am," "he lifted up his eyes," and "what was just in his eyes."

My cursory reading of reviews of Hazony's book confirms my own ambivalence about this volume. Hazony raises important questions, boldly states a point of view, supports it in a manner that sometimes falters, and opens the door to problematic political conclusions for contemporary life. It is a forthright but only partially successful brief about the sourcebook for Jewish self-understanding that has certain parallels to Ziauddin Sardar's *Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Sacred Text of Islam* and Richard L. Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, in which he interprets the foundational figure of the Latter Day Saints.

Now that I have read Hazony's book, will I be able to study the Hebrew Scriptures again? In his slender monograph *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (published in 1966), G. Ernest Wright argued that Christians need the Hebrew Scriptures. One reason is that this part of the Bible introduces and describes the one God, creator of heaven and earth, who also is present throughout the New Testament Scriptures. J. Gerald Jansen, one of my long-time colleagues who taught Old Testament and continues to publish in this field, reminded me in an exchange of emails about this book that ancient Israel is not the only nation that has justified the slaughter of enemies in the name of God. Americans have also done so. Clark M. Williamson, another long-time colleague whose field was theology, wrote in an essay entitled "Doctrines of the Atonement and the Cross" that "there are two views of God that run like parallel railroad tracks throughout the Bible, from early in the scriptures to the end. One is a God of nonviolence; the other is a God of violence. And there is no way to reconcile these two Gods; rather, we are left with a choice: which one do we affirm?" I know which one that I have chosen. It is time for me to unstick

the pages that have been closed so long, and Hazony's lively book, and a little help from my friends, may nudge me to resume this long-deferred study.

But not right away since I'm in the early stages of a project proposed by Marcus J. Borg, reading the books of the New Testament in the order in which they were written. I've worked my way through the first of these early Christian writings, the seven epistles of Paul that preceded all of the other documents in the Greek Scriptures. When I finish the other twenty-two documents in this part of the Bible, including the four gospels, Acts, the other epistles, and Revelation, and have renewed my acquaintance with the God of Jesus, Paul, Matthew, and John, it will be time to commune once again with the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jeremiah. For my New Testament heroes, and in my own life, too, these Gods are one and the same, and the ancient writings in Hebrew and the newer writings in Greek are all needed for my faith as a Christian to be complete.

Notes:

The title of this essay is taken from a column by Yorum Hazony published in the *Wall Street Journal* August 25, 2012, and subsequently online. The title of the article was "The God of Independent Minds." The essay "Doctrines of the Atonement and the Cross" by Clark M. Williamson was published in *Encounter* 71.1 (Winter 2010), 1-25; the quotation is from p. 16.