

Were the Biblical Prophets Anti-Semitic?

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Global Research, November 20, 2023

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Religion](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

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If the prophets of ancient Israel such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Malachi and Amos were alive today, Benjamin Netanyahu would accuse them of anti-Semitism for daring to describe his government as a travesty of what the Mosaic covenant was all about. A common thread running throughout the Jewish Bible – Christianity's Old Testament – was to criticize kings, the wealthy and corrupt courts for violating the Mosaic commandments to create a fair and equitable society protecting the poor from the economic oppression of debt bondage, and loss of their land. If the prophets were summoned to give judgment today, it is Netanyahu's right-wing Likud Party and the steeply unequal economy of Israel that would be condemned as violating the most basic laws of Biblical Judaism.

Prophet after prophet described the Lord as being so displeased with Israel on so many occasions for deviating from his commandments that he withdrew his protection and condemned the land to which Moses had led his followers to be conquered as punishment. The Biblical prophets attributed Israel's defeat by Sargon in 722 BC to the Lord's punishment for its falling away from the covenant the Lord had offered. Israel's punishment fit the crime: Just as its wealthy creditor elite had dispossessed their brethren from the land, so the ten tribes of Israel were deported to Mesopotamia and Media, and Judah's size was reduced to only the region surrounding Jerusalem.

Ezekiel, the great prophet of the Exile, was taken to Babylonia in 597 BC as a military hostage. He became the leading influence on Ezra and the priestly school that edited the Torah's early sources into a version that was finalized when the Jews returned from Babylon and wrote the Babylonian concepts of economic justice into the Mosaic Holiness Code. In an apocalyptic tone Ezekiel 7 announces:

"The word of the Lord came to me: ... 'The end is now upon you and I will unleash my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices,'" citing the polarization of wealth by the wealthiest Jews, corrupting the law courts and violating the original covenant with the Lord.

Were the prophets self-loathing Jews? Are those who criticize today's right-wing politicians abolishing the land's courts of justice, urging the mass murder of civilians and destroying an entire society's infrastructure anti-Semites? Does commenting that October 7th did not occur "in a vacuum," as UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres did – even indeed after characterizing it as an atrocity – make one an anti-Semite?

What I find most amazing is that no religious scholars are pointing out that Netanyahu's claim to be following a Biblical covenant as his excuse for committing genocide to seize Palestinian land and destroy its existing population is a travesty of what actually is written in the Bible.

By a sleight-of-hand like that of a stage magician trying to distract the audience's attention from what really is happening, Netanyahu has evoked what he claims to be a Biblical excuse for Israeli genocide of Palestinians. But what he pretends to be a covenant in the tradition of Moses is a vicious demand by the judge and grey eminence Samuel telling Saul, the general whom he hopes to make king:

"Now go and smite Amalek [an enemy of Israel], and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys" (1 Samuel 15:3).

These were not the Lord's own words, and Samuel was no Moses. And there was no blanket promise to back the Jews regardless of their behavior. And indeed, in following Samuel's demand for conquest – as a means of making Saul popular enough to be made king – Saul broke the Lord's commandments about proper religious ceremonial and dietary behavior. One would have no idea from Netanyahu's celebration of the compact between Samuel and Saul to become popular by military conquest that Saul's misbehavior led Samuel himself to rebuke Saul and tell him that the Lord had decided that another man must be found to be king of Israel.

It was not the Lord offering that command to destroy Amalek, but a prophet anxious to place a king on the throne. Invocation of such a command is *prima facie* evidence of an intention to commit genocide. But that seemed less important to Netanyahu than pandering to the desire for revenge amongst Israelis. Netanyahu makes no mention of the fact that Saul disobeyed the Lord's commandments and the Lord rejected him as king. Nor does Likud acknowledge the context, a few chapters earlier in 1 Samuel 12:15, describing the corrupt rule of judges and Samuel's warning that "if you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you," and the Lord's warning that "if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away."

The Jewish Bible is remarkable in criticizing the kings who ruled Judah and Israel. It is in fact a long narrative of social revolution, in which religious leaders sought – often successfully – to check the power of a selfish and aggressive oligarchy that was denounced again and again for its greed in impoverishing the poor, taking their land and reducing them to debt bondage. (My book *"... and forgive them their debts"* [Dresden 2018] describes this history.) The Jewish kings, wealthy families and corrupt courts led the Lord repeatedly to abandon them in the face of Assyria, Babylon and lesser opponents when they lapsed into selfish and oppressive behavior.

What was the covenant at Horeb near Mount Sinai? Simply put, the Lord gave Moses the Ten

Commandments, which had a moral focus on economic justice, and made a bargain binding all future Jews to obey these commandments (Exodus 19-23 and Deuteronomy 5:2 and 28:43).

From the very beginning the Lord threatened to punish the Jews if they broke this covenant. The prophets are quoted as citing the many ways in which succeeding generations broke it. Reference to that context of fair rule was the role of a prophet (both ancient and modern): to awaken the people – and to be despised by those in power, especially by oppressive oligarchies. Judea, in accordance with the commandments, was supposed to provide mutual aid and protect the poor, not let creditors take the land for themselves.

So Judea lost battles to foreigners, whom the prophets described as used by the Lord as his instrument to punish the Jews for their transgression against the economic and other moral laws that the Lord had laid down. Does one doubt that today's greater Israel [the land over which it exerts total control, including Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem] is economically polarized and unequal both financially and in terms of human rights?

Deuteronomy 28:21-25 warns that if the Jews fail to obey the Lord's commandments,

"The Lord will plague you with diseases until he has destroyed you from the land you are entering to possess," and "will cause you to be defeated before your enemies."

Deuteronomy then (29:24-25) reminds the Jews that if the Lord does to them as he had done to Sodom and Gomorrah, Admath and Zeboim,

"It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers, the covenant he made with them when he brought them out of Egypt."

The prophets described what obeying the covenant meant. Isaiah 5:3 and 8 cited economic inequality as the greatest woe, blaming the elders and leaders for taking "plunder from the poor into your houses." He declaimed:

"Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field, till no space is left alone in the land."

That is exactly the fate that is befalling the Palestinians driven off their land by today's Israel as a settler state.

Isaiah 10:1-3 declaims:

"Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and rob my oppressed people of justice, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar?"

And in 29:13-15:

"The Lord says: 'These people come to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. ... Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord.'"

Sound familiar? Isaiah 48:1 and 8 says,

“Listen, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel ... and invoke the God of Israel – but not in truth or righteousness. ... Well I know how treacherous you are; you were called a rebel from birth.”

The next prophet, Jeremiah 2, accuses Israel of abandoning the Lord and thus breaking the covenant, bringing disaster upon itself with its “wickedness and backsliding” and becoming “a corrupt, wild vine.” Calling Israel unfaithful (3:8 and 20-21) the Lord “gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away,” and Judah was just as bad. The Lord again threatened (17:3-4): “Through your own fault you will lose the inheritance I gave you ... for you have kindled my anger and it will burn forever.”

In a move that has failed to shock or dismay conservative Christians, the United States has become modern Israel’s protector and lord, while Israel’s economy (like that of the United States) is polarizing along the same lines that the Biblical prophets denounced, such as when Ezekiel 7 and 16 repeated the Lord’s anger at unfaithful Jerusalem, saying metaphorically (16:13) that “you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute,” not heeding the poor and needy. And in 34:2: “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves” but plunder their flock.

Amos 2 accuses Israel of numerous sins:

“They sell the righteous for silver, and ... trample on the heads of the poor ... and deny justice to the oppressed.”

And Micah 7:3 declaims:

“Woe to those who plan inequity, to those who plot evil on their beds ... because it is in their power to do it. ... Therefore, the Lord said, ‘I am planning disaster against this people, from which you cannot save yourselves’” when the wealthy join up as “the ruler demands gifts, the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire – they all conspire together.”

Today’s modern Zionism is at odds with the Jewish Bible. That is understandable given that its ideology comes from a very secular group despite its recent takeover by self-identified orthodox Jews.

The rhetoric used by Netanyahu is a travesty when one notes how the Jewish Bible proclaimed that wealth and property were to be distributed equitably, not concentrated in the hands of an oligarchy. Exodus 23:1 and 9 give the following insight into how aliens – the Palestinians of their day – were to be treated:

“Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong,” but “lay down the law of justice and mercy: Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.”

Is it justice and mercy to shut off water, food, medicine and fuel to an entire population and level or damage half of its buildings and most of its critical infrastructure including entire swaths of homes?

Is it justice and mercy to force hospitals to shut down, bomb ambulances, drop six 2,000

pound bombs on a refugee camp?

While billions around the world witness the super-Kristalnacht carnage in Gaza and blatant pogroms on the West Bank “serious” Western journalists warn that an existential threat is posed by refugees with hang gliders but no planes, tanks or artillery pieces.

The same journalists ignore the time-proven truism that “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the faith” and that killing thousands of innocents immediately and many thousands in the chaos that follows will not weaken but strengthen a resistance movement. It was that same reaction in the wake of Nazism that turned today’s Zionist leaders into haters.

In the final lines of the Jewish Bible, Malachi 4 speaks of the Lord’s emphasis that Israel’s covenant with God had a strong contractual quid pro quo as a condition for his support:

“‘All the arrogant and every evil-doer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the Lord Almighty. ... ‘Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.’”

If these laws continued to be disobeyed, the Lord threatened, “I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

It seems that this curse has now come, in the form of most of the world’s population so appalled at the self-righteous genocide being committed by two secular governments claiming (to the discredit of Western religions) divine sanctification, Israel and the United States, just as the Western non-Soviet economy created in 1945 in the wake of World War II is breaking into two parts.

We are living in secular times. The United States has become modern Israel’s protector and lord, and it itself has become corrupt along the same lines that the great prophets denounced. American evangelists, like the Israeli government, have excluded the message of the Biblical prophets and Jesus’s social message, selecting only the Covenant as a deed of conquest and promise of a ticket to heaven without any behavioral quid pro quo involved.

The broad spectrum of Judeo-Christian religion has been secularized as today’s world differs so fundamentally from that of classical antiquity. American TV evangelicals make a travesty of Jesus’s attempt to restore the Mosaic Jubilee Year cancelling the debts that threatened ancient populations with bondage and led to the loss of their means of self-support on the land. The “Prosperity Gospel” has replaced Jesus with Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman and Frederick Hayek.

Already in the 4th and 5th centuries, almost as soon as Constantine made Christianity the Roman State religion, Augustine changed the translation of the Lord’s Prayer and Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount by replacing debt cancellation with the non-economic idea of original sin inborn from Adam. To cap matters, the new interpretation replaced Jesus’s call for debt cancellation with Church demands for monetary contributions to obtain indulgences and forgiveness. Subsequent Christianity became so pro-creditor that it defended the sanctity of debt, not its cancellation. To finance the Crusades in the 13th century, the popes excommunicated Christian clergy and secular reformers who *opposed* paying usury – which was re-defined as “interest” and permitted as long as it was Christian bankers who were making the loans.

Israel may have a convoluted legal right to shoot Palestinians coming over its wall in an attempt to defend land that settlers have seized illegally from them. But as an occupying power it does not have the sanctimonious right to disregard virtually every international law regarding war and collective punishment simply for revenge and to demonstrate to Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and Iran what it will do to them with American support if they join in the fray. Netanyahu's actions and claims for religious sanctification for them are the antithesis of the original Judaism. His Likud government rejects the ethic of the Jewish Bible as much as America's Christian evangelists reject the message of Jesus.

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