



Heinz-Werner Kubitza

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How
the Christians
created their God

The demystification
of a world religion
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Tectum Verlag

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ISBN: 978-3-8288-6513-6

(Dieser Titel ist zugleich als gedrucktes Buch unter
der ISBN 978-3-8288-3538-2 im Tectum Verlag erschienen.)

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cover illustration: istockphoto.com © CreativeArchetype

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible is the most overrated book in world literature. Because it contains the basic writings of what is still the world's largest religion and is printed in great numbers in almost every language, even people outside the Church attribute a certain quality to that book's contents. The Bible benefits from a cult of the classics, which demands respect even from those who are not at all Christians. It is praised although most people have scarcely read it. And it undeniably has had an effect on history.

However, having a historical effect does not necessarily imply a high quality of the contents. But there exists a dogged and persistent rumor that the Bible is valuable reading matter, that it mirrors not only a faith but also a worthy ethic, that it gives orientation and meaning, and so that it can be recommended for reading, particularly to adolescents.

But that is false; or at least, it is no longer true today. The writings of the Old and New Testaments are ancient texts that not only no longer have any relations to modern society, but that in innumerable passages contradict the most elementary social and legal principles of modern, liberal society. Many patterns of behavior and premises of the Bible are inappropriate for people today; and in many passages, the Bible in fact shows in an exemplary manner precisely how *not* to act. This is not even a criticism: the Bible is a relic of a former time, a remnant from an epoch and a paradigm which rightly belong on the rubbish heap of history. The first chapters of this book are dedicated to a justification of this thesis: they provide an insight into the many abysmal, frightening, and absurd things in the holy writings of Christianity.

The prestige and influence of the Churches was greater in the past. In ten to twenty years, people unaffiliated with the two major Churches in Germany will form the majority of the population. Although the Churches are becoming more humane and compassionate, rare behavior in their history, their faithful are still leaving them. On the other hand, the person of Jesus, their alleged founder, still enjoys undiminished popularity, even among expelled opponents of the Churches or devotees of the esoteric

subculture. Jesus yes, Church no – that short formula describes the attitude of many contemporaries. It is a view of Jesus as a righteous man with a good message, whose violent death at the hands of the powerful can evoke honest sympathy even from non-Christians.

But was Jesus' message really so good? Is he really suitable as a model, let alone as a God to be adored? Historical researchers are mostly agreed that the Jesus proclaimed by the Churches, and even to some extent by the Bible, never existed.

Just as the Bible is the most overrated book in world literature, so Jesus could be the most overrated figure in world history. A central chapter will therefore present the findings of scholarly research on who Jesus really was and what can definitively be attributed to him. It will also clearly mark out the shortcomings, limitations and sometimes abysmal notions of that wandering preacher from Galilee. The findings are not always agreeable for believers, or for secular admirers. Many would prefer to avoid such a detailed examination.

What has the Church done with the teachings of Jesus? Did he really play a leading role in the fashioning of the Church and its doctrines? Did the Church show deference to him? Or was he rather only given the role of the janitor in the theological opera? These questions regarding the Church's dogmas will be considered in connection with the chapter on Jesus, and there too the findings promise to be interesting.

We then set out in search of those Christian values that are constantly invoked, not least in sermons by politicians. Everyone thinks they know what "Christian values" means, but actually defining them becomes harder the more intensely one examines them – like a *fata morgana* that gets increasingly fuzzy the more one tries to bring it into focus. A lot of what constitutes a modern polity has nothing at all in common with Christian roots or premises. Indeed, we should be relieved that our society is *not* based on the oft-invoked biblical or Christian foundations. Christianity is vastly overrated as a source of ethics and as the basis of a modern society.

This book aims to shed critical light on the principles and the expressions of the Christian paradigm which has shaped Western history for more than 1,500 years. It points out the huge divergences and discrepancies between the teachings of the Christian Churches and the teachings of the man whom those Churches falsely cite as their origin. Scholarly research, especially research on the New Testament using scientific methods, has largely and adequately demonstrated the emptiness of the foundations of Christianity. The truth about Christianity is in principle no longer a question of belief, something one can decide for or against. Before one even gets to all the dogmas that require belief, Christianity has already failed the preliminary *historical* examination. Historical research has resolved the question of the truth of Christianity in a more enduring way than all the

libraries devoted to dogmas ever could have. The question of a decision is no longer raised at all; the question now is merely whether one is personally ready to accept these results or to close one's eyes to them. The Christian paradigm can be regarded as disproved, and the question of its truth as resolved – with a negative answer. That is so despite the fact that Christianity itself will certainly continue to exist for centuries, just as the Germanic and Roman deities lived on for centuries after the victory of Christianity.

Though the closing bell has sounded on religions, the patrons are not willing to let even the most experienced host turn them out onto the street. The Churches, as sociological and institutional entities, are pertinacious in their ability to stay seated. The faithful *want to believe*, and they can only be approached with great difficulty with arguments in this area, which for them is a matter of life and death. Nevertheless, or for that very reason, critical arguments are not a waste of time; they are all the more necessary.

This book is therefore addressed to members and friends of the Christian Churches who are not afraid to be confronted with ideas that question the premises on which their lives and beliefs are based. It may open them up to new insights and lead to a better exploration of reality, but it may also make habitual, comfortable perceptions appear dubious and shallow. They may feel some discomfort, but perhaps it will be all the more eye-opening.

The book is also directed to critics of Christianity and to those who have always had an inkling that *something must be wrong* with Christianity. This book will give them the opportunity to support their correct feeling with arguments. In fact, there is quite a lot to be said about Christianity as it exists today and about how it developed.

Hence this book should be viewed as being in the best Enlightenment tradition. One must not concede the argument that the Enlightenment is old hat, and in particular that criticism of religion is a relic of the 19th century – certainly not as long as the opposite is preached every Sunday in innumerable churches. However, this book is not a contribution to a *systematic* atheism. It deals exclusively with Christianity, the main religion in the author's cultural sphere. Christianity is also the religion which has been most closely examined by scholars. Certainly there is a strong suspicion that other religions, if they were seriously submitted to scholarly research, would be found to be equally shaky.

Let us clear up a misunderstanding right from the start: the words *Jesus delusion* in the title of course do not imply that believers are somehow religious "madmen". One finds decidedly likeable and friendly people among Christians and the clergy. The purpose is also not to defame believers or their beliefs. But even among critical and non-religious persons there can sometimes be found an interesting phenomenon, islands of irrationality; think for instance of the Karlsruhe philosophers who are convinced of the truth of homeopathy, or of politicians who regularly read horoscopes.

Sideways leaps into superstition, which seem to be a quirk with such people, form part of the essence of religious believers; they form the foundation of their entire world view, and they are a permanent sin of adultery against reality. Of course believers do not want to think of themselves as superstitious. But as historical and other research has shown, the Churches and their dogmas are precisely that: forms of organized irrationality.

Believers simply have to put up with the fact that assertions such as the one that a God the Son, having become a man, died on the cross for our sins, that he was resurrected from the dead, and that he is a part of a divine Trinity, are being dragged out of the ecclesiastical darkness and the mustiness of the confessional into the comparatively bright light of historical observation. Doggedly clinging to traditional and allegedly eternal and sacred doctrines despite the clear evidence of their historical development, asserting that there is an imaginary world apart from the world that can be empirically experienced, or the expectation of a Hell with eternal tortures or a Paradise (with or without virgins) as well as a life after death – all these really are features of delusion.

1 THE EMBARRASSING GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Non-Christians might well ask first of all: what sense can I make of an old God? And why all the fuss over a few ancient texts? But the texts are not limited in time to Antiquity. Even today, the Churches still indefatigably recommend reading the Bible, children in schools and in religious instruction are still confronted with these texts, and a life according to “biblical principles” is still something that pious folk and the orthodox strive for. But the biblical writings, in their concepts of God and man, cannot be reconciled with humane and liberal principles.

The largely positive picture of the Bible is due mainly to the fact that we take it on board only in fragments. The faithful are offered a bowdlerized version by the Churches, a *selection* from the texts that is meant to feed the faithful only *those* passages that are easy to digest. A juicy roast is sold to the faithful as a vegetarian meal because of its vegetable garnishment. This is the mining technique, used consciously by the Churches but also unconsciously by Bible readers: they pick out edifying and positive passages and filter out whatever does not fit into their view of things.

Jesus of Nazareth the man is of central significance for Christians. If they understand him, people think they have understood the Bible, even the Old Testament. In later chapters of this book we will deal in detail with Jesus of Nazareth, about whom there is quite a bit to be said. But before turning to the alleged Son, let us look first at the alleged Father, the God of the Old Testament.

Yahweh – God of war and violence

Despite all the whitewashing by the Churches, and to their embarrassment, the God of the Old Testament comes across as a war god in numerous passages. Yahweh is the one who leads the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt and from whom they receive the land of Palestine, which of course they have to take from its rightful owners. God’s favors to Israel often come in war. And the God Yahweh still has a completely naive relation to war

and murder. He does not just permit wars of aggression and extermination, he explicitly orders them. That God seems to have no ethical scruples; gentlemanly restraint is not his style. God is the *Lord of Sebaoth*, the God of hosts, which the Churches (they still use the title today) now like to refer to as “the heavenly hosts”, but which in the original meaning describes a bunch of warriors. Yahweh was a god of war.

The wars that Yahweh calls on his people to fight are then, of course, holy wars, and Israel’s victories in battle are signs of his power. He himself joins in the fight. Before the crossing of the Jordan we read:¹

Understand therefore this day, that the LORD thy God *is* he which goeth over before thee; *as* a consuming fire he shall destroy them, and he shall bring them down before thy face: so shalt thou drive them out, and destroy them quickly, as the LORD hath said unto thee (Deuteronomy 9:3).

The taking of the land is understood by Jews and Christians alike as a blessing from God. From today’s point of view it was clearly a campaign of conquest and extermination and was marked by extraordinary cruelty, yet it is justified on religious grounds.

When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it. And it shall be, if it make thee answer of peace, and open unto thee, then it shall be, *that* all the people *that is* found therein shall be tributaries unto thee, and they shall serve thee. And if it will make no peace with thee, but will make war against thee, then thou shalt besiege it: And when the LORD thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword: But the women, the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, *even* all the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself; and thou shalt eat the spoil of thine enemies, which the LORD thy God hath given thee. Thus shalt thou do unto all the cities *which are* very far off from thee, *which are* not of the cities of these nations. But of the cities of these people, which the LORD thy God doth give thee *for* an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: (Deuteronomy 20:10–16)

Before the invasion of Palestine by the Israelites we read in another passage:

When the LORD thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee, the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than thou; And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, *and* utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them: But thus shall ye deal with them; ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire. And thou shalt consume all

¹ All quotes from the King James Bible (translator)

the people which the LORD thy God shall deliver thee; thine eye shall have no pity upon them: neither shalt thou serve their gods; for that *will be* a snare unto thee (Deuteronomy 7:1–2, 5, 16).

The Old Testament is full of such passages in which Yahweh summons his people to war and extermination. And the people demonstrate their obedience precisely by fulfilling the divine bloodlust.

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites (...) And they warred against the Midianites, as the LORD commanded Moses; and they slew all the males. And they slew the kings of Midian, beside the rest of them that were slain; *namely*, Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, five kings of Midian: Balaam also the son of Beor they slew with the sword. And the children of Israel took *all* the women of Midian captives, and their little ones, and took the spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods. And they burnt all their cities wherein they dwelt, and all their goodly castles, with fire. And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD. Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves. (Numbers 31:1–2, 7–10, 15–18).

Religious heroes like Moses and Joshua turn out to be war criminals from today's point of view; in their religious delusion they see themselves as instruments of their God. Moses can sing:

I will make mine arrows drunk with blood, and my sword shall devour flesh; *and that* with the blood of the slain and of the captives, from the beginning of revenges upon the enemy (Deuteronomy 32, 42).

It is incomprehensible that the Bible, despite such unbridled fantasies of violence, is still considered a moral authority, or that pious parents still make their children read it. Religious heroes can easily obstruct the development of a humane ethic. Richard Dawkins writes in his book, *The God Delusion*, of an experiment with more than 1,000 students in Israel aged between eight and fourteen to whom the report on the battle for Jericho was read out:

And it came to pass at the seventh time, when the priests blew with the trumpets, Joshua said unto the people, Shout; for the LORD hath given you the city. And the city shall be accursed, *even* it, and all that *are* therein, to the LORD: only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all that *are* with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent. And ye, in any wise keep *yourselves* from the accursed thing, lest ye make *yourselves* accursed, when ye take of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it. But all the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, *are* con-

secrated unto the LORD: they shall come into the treasury of the LORD. So the people shouted when *the priests* blew with the trumpets: and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city. And they utterly destroyed all that *was* in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword. But Joshua had said unto the two men that had spied out the country, Go into the harlot's house, and bring out thence the woman, and all that she hath, as ye swear unto her. And the young men that were spies went in, and brought out Rahab, and her father, and her mother, and her brethren, and all that she had; and they brought out all her kindred, and left them without the camp of Israel. And they burnt the city with fire, and all that *was* therein: only the silver, and the gold, and the vessels of brass and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD.(Joshua 6:16–24).

The students were then asked whether Joshua and the Israelites had acted properly. Two thirds of the children thought their actions were proper. God had ordered it, and the people in Jericho in any case followed another religion; those justifications came from the children. For Israeli students Joshua is simply a hero of the people; their religion has hammered that into them. Hence his deeds were not only excusable, but just. The results from a control group of 186 Israeli students are telling. For the control group, the name *Joshua* was replaced by *General Lin* and *Israel* by *a Chinese kingdom 3,000 years ago*. Perhaps you can imagine the result? Only 7% found General Lin's conduct proper, while 75% condemned it.

Many stories from the Old Testament are more than questionable from an ethical perspective. In Genesis 22, we are told that Abraham was ordered to sacrifice his son Isaac because God wanted to put him to the test. Abraham is resolutely ready to obey; only at the last minute does God explain the event as a sort of divine April fool's joke. Yet that story, in reality a religious perversity, is still valued by the Churches as a testament to strong belief. But should a father who is prepared to slaughter his son at the behest of a religion really be a model? Or is that not rather a mark of fanaticism and religious delusion? And to think that children are also exposed to such a story.

Incidentally, Jephthah's daughter was not so lucky (Judges 11:28–40). Her father had sworn that if the Israelites defeated the Ammonites he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house. That happened to be his beloved daughter. He mourns and complains, but he keeps his word: the daughter has to die. So is Jephthah also a hero of the faith? Or is he rather a religious fanatic who does not even stop short of murdering a child? What sort of God demands such sacrifices, and what sort of people are willing to perform them?

And what about the Deluge with which God exterminates humanity. Of course it did not actually happen; as has been proven, the Israelites helped themselves to various bits of Babylonian mythology. However, what picture of God does that pious tale project? Still today, Noah and his ark are used in Christian kindergartens as topics for games and handicrafts. Genocide as a children's game. And is the dove really a symbol of hope? After the rest of the world has just been drowned by its Creator?

Other questionable aspects of the Old Testament include the totally exaggerated threats and punishments should Israel not obey. Slavish obedience seems to be the highest virtue in the Old Testament.

But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee: Cursed *shalt* thou *be* in the city, and cursed *shalt* thou *be* in the field. Cursed *shall be* thy basket and thy store. Cursed *shall be* the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep. Cursed *shalt* thou *be* when thou comest in, and cursed *shalt* thou *be* when thou goest out. The LORD shall send upon thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest thine hand unto for to do, until thou be destroyed, and until thou perish quickly; because of the wickedness of thy doings, whereby thou hast forsaken me. The LORD shall make the pestilence cleave unto thee, until he have consumed thee from off the land, whither thou goest to possess it. The LORD shall smite thee with a consumption, and with a fever, and with an inflammation, and with an extreme burning, and with the sword, and with blasting, and with mildew; and they shall pursue thee until thou perish. And thy heaven that *is* over thy head shall be brass, and the earth that is under thee *shall be* iron. The LORD shall make the rain of thy land powder and dust: from heaven shall it come down upon thee, until thou be destroyed. The LORD shall cause thee to be smitten before thine enemies: thou shalt go out one way against them, and flee seven ways before them: and shalt be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth. And thy carcase shall be meat unto all fowls of the air, and unto the beasts of the earth, and no man shall fray *them* away. The LORD will smite thee with the botch of Egypt, and with the emerods, and with the scab, and with the itch, whereof thou canst not be healed. The LORD shall smite thee with madness, and blindness, and astonishment of heart (...) (Deuteronomy 28:15–28).

A certain mental confusion does seem to play a role in such statements. Of course such primitive outpourings are not really the speeches of a deity. We should not impute such a miserable standard to any God. All of those statements and threatening gestures were invented by people with vested interests, most of them probably by priests. But that does not matter either. Often they are introduced by "Thus speaks God" (*co amar Jahwe*) and are meant to be regarded as God's word. And there is no doubt that they were mostly regarded as such, and that pious Bible readers and a Catholicism

still untouched by the Enlightenment still regard them as such today. The picture of God and the ethical maxims taught here are to be repudiated. They are contrary in an extreme degree to the values of our social order. The Bible shows just how people should *not* act.

Before the exodus from Egypt, that God has Moses proclaim:

And Moses said, Thus saith the LORD, About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt: And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that *is* behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, nor shall be like it any more (Exodus 11:4–6).

Yahweh follows up his threats with deeds and bullies the Egyptians with a series of other plagues. Here too the facts are that none of this really occurred; historians are unanimous that these are much later ornamentations of more prosaic happenings – if not pure inventions. What is significant here is the picture of a god of slaughter who will obviously use any means.

Again and again we read of the sadistic cruelty of Yahweh, who sends fire and floods, who *devours the peoples*, who *crushes their bones* (Numbers 24:8), who orders the massacre of women and children, whose joy it is *to obliterate and annihilate you* (Deuteronomy 28:61) if you do not obey. Such invectives against his own people scarcely leave room for more malice against foreign peoples.

In Isaiah we read, in the outpourings against Babylon:

The LORD of hosts mustereth the hosts for battle. They come from a far country, from the end of heaven, *even* the LORD, and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole land. Howl ye; for the day of the LORD *is* at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty. Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt: And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces *shall be as* flames. Behold, the day of the LORD cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. And I will punish the world for *their* evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir. Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger. And it shall be as the chased roe, and as a sheep that no man taketh up: they shall every man turn to his own people, and flee every one into his own land. Every one that is found shall be thrust through; and every one that is joined *unto them* shall fall by the sword. Their children also shall be dashed

to pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished. Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and *as for* gold, they shall not delight in it. *Their* bows also shall dash the young men to pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children (Isaiah 13:4–18)

The Medes have to serve as victims because Israel itself is no longer in a position to defend itself against the Babylonian Empire, which is on a higher level both militarily and culturally. Incidentally, the Medes, mobilized by Yahweh, were also unable to do anything about the predominance of the Babylonians. Wishful thinking of the priestly circles!

The notion that Yahweh himself makes the peoples contumacious and then punishes them for it is particularly perfidious.

But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him: for the LORD thy God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into thy hand, *as appeareth* this day (Deuteronomy 2:30).

Yahweh's actions can also be seen in other militaristic deeds. Of the Egyptians we are told by the prophet Isaiah:

And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians: and they shall fight every one against his brother, and every one against his neighbor; city against city, *and* kingdom against kingdom (Isaiah 19:2).

That is really not very nice. People with other beliefs in general receive very little sympathy. Many are the invocations to destroy foreign cult sites. In the so-called Ritual Decalogue we read:

Take heed to thyself, lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land whither thou goest, lest it be for a snare in the midst of thee: But ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves: For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name *is* Jealous, *is* a jealous God (Exodus 34:12–14).

That too is not exactly a valuable contribution to religious dialogue. But in ancient Hebrew there was no word for "tolerance". The adherents of foreign cults are persecuted and killed, and the battering to death of priests of Baal is given a laudatory mention. And anybody from their own people who wants to serve foreign gods, that is, who does not toe the religious line, is also to be punished, by death of course. And that is true even of the closest relatives, as is hammered home explicitly:

If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which *is* as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers; *Namely*, of the gods of the people which *are* round about you, nigh unto thee, or far off from thee, from the *one* end of the earth even unto the *other* end of the earth; Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken

unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him: But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. And thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die; because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and shall do no more any such wickedness as this is among you (Deuteronomy 13:6–11).

This conjures up images of the dark chapters of German history, complete with the incitements to denunciation. After the event of the adoration of the golden calf, Moses demonstrates that this command is not just theoretical:

And he said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, *and* go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. For Moses had said, Consecrate yourselves today to the LORD, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day (Exodus 32:27–29).

Thou shalt slay thy neighbor? We usually hear a different version! This illustrates how strongly those ancient texts diverge from our ethical maxims, how broad the historical chasm really is. The claim that such texts really have no place in a free and tolerant society becomes understandable. They belong to the poison cabinet of history, and certainly not in the hands of children. It is a sign of religious deformation that believers no longer notice the abysmal inhumanity of such passages. Not only love makes you blind.

Another aspect that is quite remote from humane notions is the death penalty, which the biblical God pronounces liberally, even for comparatively harmless offenses. There is a bloodcurdling list in Franz Buggle's book, *For They Do Not Know What They Believe*, which offers an overview of the inhumane and misanthropic passages of the Old and New Testaments, not merely in regard to the death penalty. The offenses worthy of death include not just murder (but only of one's own people!) and religious "apostasy", but also adultery (at least for the woman), fortune telling, sexual intercourse during menstruation, and sodomy. Other acts worthy of death are gathering wood on the Sabbath, consuming leavened bread at the Feast of the Passover, eating meat older than three days, touching Mount Sinai, a priest drinking alcohol before a divine service, or a high priest wearing incorrect clothing during service in the Temple. Premarital sexual intercourse, a fiancée *not* screaming when she is raped, and of course homosexuality are also punishable by death. Sons who are difficult and disobedient

could also be stoned (Bugge, *For They Do Not Know What They Believe*, p. 94ff.).

If such instructions were found in the writings of an unknown people we would correctly look on them as primitive (in the most negative sense of the word). But the faithful and the Churches still attribute great ethical competence and importance to this Bible. And do not think that the misanthropic passages are only exceptions. As the conservative theologian and Jesuit Raymund Schwager realized:

The passages that speak of an explicit order to kill on God's part are quite numerous. Apart from about a thousand verses in which Yahweh himself appears as the direct executor of violent acts of punishment, and apart from many texts according to which the Lord delivers evildoers over to the sword of the punisher, there are more than a hundred further passages in which Yahweh explicitly orders that people be killed. According to those statements, He himself does not kill and hence retreats somewhat into the background. However, He is the one who orders the annihilation of human life, who abandons His people like beasts for the slaughter, and who incites people against each other (Raymund Schwager, *Do We Need a Scapegoat? Violence and Redemption in the Biblical Writings*, p. 70; the whole text is available in German online).

The Old Testament is a document of religious extremism, glorification of violence, and intolerance. It is marked by racism, contempt for dissidents, perverse fantasies of punishment, and an antiquated ethic. "Whereas the cobbled-together ancient Jewish books had an ill-tempered and implacable and bloody and provincial god, who was probably more frightening when he was in a good mood – the classical attribute of the dictator." (Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, p. 175).

But in our cultural environment we are accustomed to reading the Old Testament from the viewpoint of the New Testament, and to interpret the God of the Old Testament through the one of the New. The New Testament God is understood, at least primarily, as a God of love, as the father of Jesus Christ. Passages in the Old Testament that are not in accordance with this view are unconsciously passed over by believers, and they have no place in the Churches' cycle of sermons. However, inhumanity and misanthropy can be found even in persons who are highly esteemed in the proclamation and in parts of the Bible that enjoy a high reputation. King David, the most important king of Israel and Judea (although his empire was no bigger than a province of Germany), is still honored in our day as a hero of belief; many of the psalms are (falsely) attributed to him. But before he became king, David was, as can be read in the Bible (1 Samuel 27:1–12), a sort of gang leader among the Philistines, at that time Israel's most dangerous enemies. As such, David invaded the land and spared neither men nor women. Only later did he change sides and fight against his former protectors. The Philis-

tines had given him protection against his foe Saul. Later he would marry Saul's daughter and supposedly gifted Saul the foreskins of 100 Philistines! Today a box of wine is an acceptable gift for the in-laws – David simply slew 200 Philistines.

As king, David then wages war almost constantly on all the peoples and tribes in the neighborhood. "I have pursued mine enemies, and destroyed them; and turned not again until I had consumed them" (2 Samuel 22:38). The people captured in the Ammonite city of Rabba met this fate: he "brought forth the people that *were* therein, and put *them* under saws, and under harrows of iron, and under axes of iron, and made them pass through the brick kiln: and thus did he unto all the cities of the children of Ammon. So David and all the people returned unto Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 12:31).

That burning to death in the brick kilns was obviously so embarrassing to the Lutheran Church after the Second World War that it changed it, contradicting Martin Luther's translation, to "and made them work in the brick kilns" (cf. Karlheinz Deschner, *History of Christianity's Crimes*, vol. 1, p. 86f.). In 1 Samuel 6:19 it is reported that David had 50,700 people killed just because they had looked on the Ark of the Covenant. Here too the Lutheran Church of Germany makes of Luther's translation "a modest 70 men" (Deschner, *ibid.*, p. 88).

Of course it is possible to assume that the cruelties are also exaggerated in many passages. The crueller a ruler was, the more powerful he appeared. But even independently of factual historical events, what a backward ethics this once again displays! Stories about David, because of their vividness, are often performed in Christian kindergartens. Have we nothing better to offer our children?

Despite all the violence, David glorifies himself beyond measure in a song of thanksgiving, since he regards himself, despite all the bloodletting, as acting in accordance with God's will.

The LORD *is* my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; The God of my rock; in him will I trust: *he is* my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my savior; thou savest me from violence (2 Samuel 22, 2–3).

When a ruler can speak in such tones (although the song presumably did *not* originate with David), and the whole chapter continues in that note, the believers are quite prepared to not look too closely at his deeds. Yahweh too explicitly praises David because he *did what was pleasing to him*. We must free ourselves of any notion that this has some spiritual or metaphorical sense. In the Old Testament, murder is good if it is done with the right belief. The terrorists on 9/11 saw things in the same light.

Unfortunate Saul, the first king of Israel and David's predecessor, had at first also been one of Yahweh's darlings. Yahweh had ordered of him, via the early prophet Samuel:

Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass (1 Samuel 15:3).

And Saul did what God had ordered him to. But he spared the best of the animals (although he butchering the men, women, and children!), so Yahweh is disgruntled.

It repenteth me that I have set up Saul *to be* king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments (1 Samuel 15, 11).

Through Samuel He not only reproaches Saul, but also takes away his kingdom. Saul, who tries to justify himself by saying that he meant to sacrifice the best animals, has to accept that *obedience is better than sacrificial offerings*. The Churches are always happy to preach this verse, but without paying close attention to the context.

In the face of this divine lust for destruction and vengeance, is not principled disobedience exactly what is called for? To be merciful to oppressed human beings when God is unmerciful? Of course such a way of thinking was probably unthinkable to people acting at that time; it is, we admit, unhistorical. But what can be gained today, on an ethical level, from such stories? What do they impart to the believer? What can children learn from such stories other than a religiously embellished slavish obedience?

The truth remains that the God of the Old Testament is mightily deficient on an ethical level; the Old Testament writings and the half-mythical religious heroes in them are not suitable for the imparting of values. As Richard Dawkins writes, "[t]he Bible is a blueprint of in-group morality, complete with instructions for genocide, enslavement of out-groups, and world domination" (The God Delusion, p. 258)." And further: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction" (p. 45).

The *psalms* are held in especially high esteem by the Churches. They are frequently included in readings at divine services, and are particularly recommended for reading as a prayer book. Whoever is expecting reflective material at last is bound for another disappointment: in the psalms too, violence and the will to destroy dominate. For Bugge the psalms are texts marked over great stretches and in a degree rarely found elsewhere by primitive and uncontrolled feelings of hatred, lust for revenge, and self-righteousness (Franz Bugge, For they Do Not Know What They Believe, pp. 75–81, 102–111, the quote from p. 103). Right from the start Yahweh is praised for his violence:

Arise, O LORD; save me, O my God: for thou hast smitten all mine enemies *upon* the cheek bone; thou hast broken the teeth of the ungodly (Psalms 3:7). The person praying extols God: Thou hast rebuked the gentile, thou hast destroyed the wicked, thou hast put out their name forever and ever (Psalms 9:5). Through thee will we push down our enemies: through thy name will we tread them under that rise up against us (Psalm 44:5). The Lord at thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath. He shall judge among the gentile, he shall fill *the places* with the dead bodies; he shall wound the heads over many countries (Psalms 110:5–6).

Some sayings, such as this one against Babylon, are abominable: “Happy *shall he be*, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones (Psalms 137:9). Primitive thoughts of revenge combined with a self-righteousness that would be hard to equal. Yet in the Churches the prayer becomes: “Praise the Lord, for He is friendly, and His goodness lasts for ever and ever.”

One can therefore understand what Buggle says with regard to the psalter: “it is a long time since I saw a text so marked by excessive and unbridled hatred and lust for revenge” (Buggle, *For They Do Not Know What They Believe*, p. 104).

But most of us have a very different impression of the Old Testament in our minds. Is the selection of questionable passages not very one-sided? Can one not also find many positive passages on the Old Testament God?

Of course one can. But the one-sidedness in the choice of passages should not be blamed on Buggle but on the *Churches*, which present us with an image of God that, as far as possible, can be linked with the friendlier New Testament image of God. Most of the incriminating passages are never heard in the entire life of a churchgoer; they are simply not used in the churches, certainly from a sense of embarrassment. And when reading the Bible privately, one will of course unconsciously seek out those passages that are most edifying to pious feelings. The unconscious itself exercises a sort of censure, or interprets cruelty in a way that is compatible with piety.

The ethical dilemma is that in the Old Testament, texts with positive associations and others with negative associations are seamlessly linked. God’s goodness is praised because He has exterminated the enemies. Because God is faithful He will exterminate peoples of other beliefs. Because God listens to prayers the enemies of those praying will die. And often we find verses and passages filled with contempt for mankind in immediate proximity to passages that are viewed as positive.

The prophets have so far not been mentioned in this short overview, but is the review of their ethics is equally devastating. Everybody knows the following verses from the Christmas liturgy:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined (...) For

unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of *his* government and peace *there shall be* no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts (!) will perform this (Isaiah 9:2; 6–7).

Such verses are totally in accord with the taste of a religious soul. But just a few words later the idyll is again shattered with the announcement of a divine criminal court. God himself goads on the enemies of Israel and incites them against Israel (Isaiah 9:10), and soon chaos and annihilation are again forecast:

Therefore the Lord shall have no joy in their young men, neither shall have mercy on their fatherless and widows: for every one *is* an hypocrite and an evildoer, and every mouth speaketh folly. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand *is* stretched out still (Isaiah 9:17).

There is probably not a single passage presenting a positive image of God that is not contradicted a few verses later. In the psalms especially, the carrot and the stick alternate in quick succession. But the stick is clearly dominant.

How can a holy book be used today in religious and ethical instruction when it presents passages worthy of consideration, of which many are indisputably to be found in the Old Testament, seamlessly juxtaposed to a primitive ethic of revenge? Is such a book really helpful in the search for an intellectual or spiritual orientation? Were there not already in Antiquity texts of a decidedly higher level and of greater value? The fact remains: the Bible is the most overrated book in world literature. And that is particularly true of the Old Testament. After all, it owes its significance to its link with an expanding Christianity which at the beginning was half fateful. And Christianity has dragged the Old Testament piggyback through the centuries as an onerous heritage. The great scholar Adolf von Harnack expressed this in the often cited passage from his book on Marcion:

To reject the OT in the 2nd century was a mistake which the Church correctly refused to make; to retain it in the 16th century was a fate from which the Reformation could still not withdraw; but to conserve it in the 19th century as a canonical document is the result of a religious and ecclesiastical paralysis (Adolf von Harnack, Marcion, Leipzig 1921, p. 248f.).

In the 21st century the authoritarian image of God and the antiquated image of man and society presented by numerous Old Testament passages is outright embarrassing to many pastors. One thing can be confidently assumed: the ethical standard of the people who are active in the Churches today is vastly superior to that of the Old Testament God. Probably no

pastor today preaches in the same spirit – or better said, evil spirit – as the Old Testament. There are pastors, mostly Protestant, who have in the course of their studies also engaged in scholarly research on their traditions, and who advocate a theology shaped by the European Enlightenment; they are often active not only in the Church but also in society. They are of course aware of the problems with the Old Testament, even if they prefer to interpret them as weaknesses rather than as an ethical oath of disclosure. They just try to make the best of things. Christianity survives today also due to the fact that its office holders have a better ethical foundation than that provided by the Old Testament, and that it proclaims a God that is precisely *not* modeled on a God who behaves like an unbridled choleric.

A hodgepodge of history in the Old Testament

In defense of Yahweh's honor, it could be said that it is not at all *him* who speaks in the Old Testament, but that it the priests that put their provincial group ethic in their God's mouth. Human rules are said to be God's commandments, and as such claim an absolute authority derived from God. An old trick, frequently observed in the history of religion. So it is not God who is cruel and inhumane, but rather his votaries who unmask themselves as such. That is what they have made of their God. And only in this context can one comprehend why there are so many statements by God on comparatively unimportant topics. Even pious Bible readers will have wondered why in those days Yahweh concerned himself with every trivial thing. No God who took himself seriously would be interested in the confused abundance of rules regulating rituals that are set out in the Pentateuch. But the priests had a heightened interest in those regulations. They are the true authors of the words of God. And obviously they had no scruples about making intensive use of this instrument and of recruiting their God for the business of daily ritual. Hence the speeches of God in the Old Testament are intentional falsifications; the formula *co amar Jahwe*, or *thus speaketh Yahweh*, does not introduce a divine statement but merely mirror the cultic and social issues of a society that existed more than 2,000 years ago. Those rules would be completely irrelevant to us, just like the ritual laws of a South Seas tribe, if the Old Testament did not trail behind Christianity like a shadow and if it were not acknowledged as being relevant to the lives of the believers.

Let us note once more that from an ethical perspective it is of no importance whether a God really said something, or indeed whether he actually said anything at all. The decisive factor is what statements have been ascribed to him by tradition, what image of the world, of men, and of God this tradition presents, and what ethic is mirrored in these images.

Well then, who was Yahweh in reality if his words are traceable to the inventions of priests? That question takes us some distance from our topic, which revolves around Christianity and Jesus of Nazareth. However, some information on the state of research into the Old Testament and the Old Testament God would not be out of place here. In the general consciousness, especially among the pious, the Old Testament still is viewed as a relatively unified block, even though it consists of many writings with different accentuations. In contrast, research into the Old Testament using the instruments of historical criticism has attempted to describe the variety and the development of Old Testament writings. For example, for almost two centuries source criticism has been relentlessly investigating the text, primarily the Pentateuch, the so-called five books of Moses. Research in this area is more arduous than research into the New Testament, because the Pentateuch is based on a much longer history of transmission.

It is abundantly clear that the picture presented of the earliest times of Israel is a construction from later times, often much later times, and that much that is familiar to us from religious instruction did not occur as presented. The following sections are an attempt to present the basic differences between the biblical depiction and that of critical historical research, based not on the author's opinion but on the findings of academic Old Testament research.

The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are linked genealogically in the Old Testament, originally were probably three distinct tribal patriarchs who presumably had no contact with each other. Whether they were historical at all is quite uncertain. There is "no evidence to make a certain statement on place and time, on the preconditions and circumstances of the human figures of the patriarchs", wrote the Old Testament scholar Martin Noth in his famous *History of Israel*. Each group clearly revered one or more different gods, the so-called father gods, of whom traces are still present in such descriptions as "the God of Abraham", "the God of Isaac" (Genesis 31:42) or "the mighty God of Jacob" (Genesis 49:24) (see the classic work on this topic by Albrecht Alt, *The God of the Fathers*, 1929). As nomads or half-nomads, these groups moved about on the periphery of civilized land. When those tribes later joined with other tribes and became settled, the patriarchal traditions somehow had to be united. That was accomplished by placing the fathers in a genealogical line of descent. So now Isaac became Abraham's son and Jacob Isaac's son. The various concepts of God were also gradually reconciled.

According to tradition, Jacob had twelve sons. But the twelve tribes did not spring from these sons, as the Old Testament construction would have it; rather, the reverse happened: the tribes pre-existed, and they then had to be traced back to a patriarch. In later periods the tradition of the patriarchs was adapted and an attempt was made to construct a common