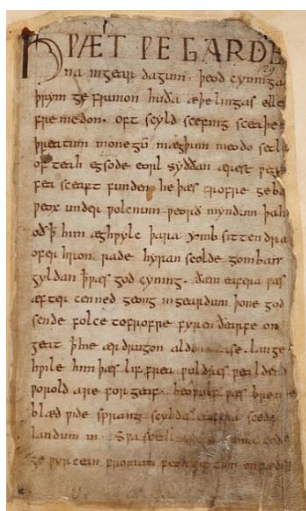


LEARNING UNIT 3. I didn't know that! or That's why I couldn't get it right!

When we read any text written in a time far removed from our own, we have to face the problems that result from that fact. For example, when a modern English reader reads the epic poem Beowulf he feels challenged by the text. You need help to understand the words, what the poem says, you need to understand the culture in which the poem was created to fully grasp the meaning behind the metaphors, expressions and images used by the poet, you need to know the mentality of the time to understand certain forms of action that today would be incomprehensible and reprehensible but which when the text was written belonged to the normal mode of behavior accepted and the worldview of the man of the time, and of course, you take a mental disposition that allows you to enjoy reading, that is, you know that what you are reading is a legend or a fable. So, the ancient texts challenge us in different ways, not only because of what they have to say about any specific subject, but also because of the time that has passed since their creation. There are linguistic, textual, contextual, transmission, and literary genre problems that must be addressed in order to correctly understand the text. Well, if that is true for a short text written by a single poet in a time relatively close to us, written in a single language, belonging to a single literary genre and coming from a context quite close to us; one can imagine that those challenges will be even greater when we read a text written over a very long period of time, as we said, over ten centuries, by many different authors, in different languages [at least Hebrew and Aramaic, but also Greek if one adds the deuterocanonical books] in which many different literary genres can be found and which was written at least ten centuries before Beowulf [more than twenty centuries before our time] and in an absolutely different context, not only linguistically, but also geographically and mentally. I will only mention here some of those challenges, those that are most important from my point of view and that most hinder the correct understanding and enjoyment of the text. I hope that what I am about to share with you will be of some help and not raise more questions than it answers. As always, if you do not find it useful or interesting, you can skip this chapter.



First page of Beowulf



The Scroll" (Megillah) of Esther

3.1. From that dust comes this sludge or The root of all conflicts?

To begin with I would like to draw your attention to the fact that we consider the Old Testament to be inspired. Depending on how we understand this concept, we will have more or less trouble reading and understanding the Old Testament. This is not the place to discuss the meaning of this concept as it has its proper place within the body of Dogmatic Theology, but we have to be aware that because we think of these texts as "the Word of God", we tend to consider anything in them as said or intended by God. And because we sometimes feel embarrassed, uneasy or even disturbed by what we read in the OT we often make a very drastic decision, we choose not to read the Old Testament and in our subconscious we believe that the OT should not be part of the Bible. From a narrow or erroneous concept of what we mean when we speak of Holy Scripture as "the word of God" comes a great deal of antagonism against these books from within the Church and also from outside. Some people have used this as an excuse to not be Christians [baloney, as a friend of mine would say]. Let me give you an example of what I am saying.

We have all read ancient epic poems, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid, or Beowulf. In all these texts we find the most horrible, cruelest, and bloodiest descriptions of battles, fights, assassinations, betrayals, etc., but no one is offended or disturbed. We all understand that these texts were written from a vastly different mentality than ours and at most we think, how brutal they were! while smiling slightly. However, when that same reader reads the Bible and finds in it also very cruel but isolated episodes, like Jael driving a nail into Sisera's temple [Judges 4:17-21], or Judith cutting off Holofernes' head [In the deuterocanonical book of Judith], this reader is not only shocked but uses these texts as an excuse to reject the OT as a whole. This is sometimes a big problem for Christians because we feel that we need to defend and justify everything as if it were willed or directed by God, but that is not what God expects us to do. Certainly, the Bible conveys God's self-revelation and God's message and will for human beings, but this was done using human writers and these human writers had their own personality, used their brain and heart in writing, their own worldview and the words and concepts they had at hand. The idea that everything written in the Old Testament comes from the mouth and will of God has been the source of many problems.

3.2. Immorality, decency, and hypocrisy. Challenges for the [post]modern morality

The OT poses a wide range of challenges to our modern values. Some of these challenges were also perceived in the ancient world. We have for example the case of the pagan authors who accused the Jews of impiety because they did not believe in the gods; that is, because of their monotheism. Today this accusation does not have much weight among us but in the ancient world the accusation of impiety could lead to death. Let us remember that this was the cause of Socrates' death sentence in Athens. On the other hand, from most of the accusations of immorality that ancient pagan writers make, it is clear that they did not know the writings of the OT at all.

One of the authors who most harshly criticizes the writings of the OT, which he did know, is Marcion of Sinope, a Christian who finds himself unable to reconcile the OT with the faith of the NT, from his perspective it is impossible for the God of the NT and the OT to be the same God so he considers the God of the Old Testament not to be the God of Jesus but a kind of lesser God, creator of matter, the 'Demiurge'. His ideas [altered to a greater or lesser extent by his followers] gave rise to a heresy, *Marcionism*, which was condemned by the Church. For him, the God of the OT was a vengeful and spiteful, bloody and angry God who had to be rejected in favor of the God of Jesus Christ, compassionate, good, patient, merciful and full of love for human beings.

Already in the nineteenth century we have another remarkable example, that of the well-known and influential German Lutheran theologian Carl Gustav Adolf von Harnack [quite a name]. Building on Marcion's ideas, he also developed the theory that the Old Testament should be removed from Christian Bibles. Harnack argues that much of the criticism that the Church suffers has its origin in the OT narratives. Therefore, if *"to reject the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake which the church rightly repudiated; to retain it in the sixteenth century was a fate which the Reformation could not yet avoid; but to continue to keep it in Protestantism as a canonical document after the nineteenth century is the consequence of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis."* [A. von Harnack, *Marcion*, 127]

It is hard to say whether he was at all aware of the impact of his words. The fact is that his words fell on fertile ground and served to incite and justify the deep anti-Jewish feelings that were being fostered in the Third Reich. Thus, Rosenberg, the Nazi ideologue of anti-Semitism, was able to affirm sometime later that the OT is nothing more than "a shameful jumble of stories of pimps and scoundrels". A last example of blind hatred against the OT would be that of the British scientist Richard Dawkins, who in his book *The God Delusion* presents the OT God with words that would have pleased Marcion and no doubt Rosenberg: *"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."*

Although these statements are certainly exaggerated and are the result of ignorance of the writings of the OT, malice, prejudice or insufficient knowledge of the context in which they arise, we have to acknowledge that the OT poses many problems of a moral nature for men and women today.

3.2.1. Can I take this out of my Bible?

Indeed, in the pages of the OT we can find examples of outrageous actions, dishonest behavior, evil attitudes, words expressing hatred and resentment and this we must accept. Those examples are there because the Bible does not hide the human, but we cannot say that God wants us to imitate those behaviors or attitudes. The Bible, the book that reveals God to us and gives the Jewish people their identity, does not hide the human by being 'too human'," that is a substantial difference from what other peoples

and nations have done. With what we ourselves do today, we tend to hide and conceal our shames and mistakes. Do we not always try to show a beautiful, made-up face? Is it not appearance that counts in our society and in the account of the national past of each country, which is always glorious? I offer below some biblical examples that are not very inspiring and cause discomfort and even rejection. I will limit myself to their enumeration.

- **DISHONEST BEHAVIOR:** Abraham lies about Sara being his sister [Genesis 12, 10-12 and Genesis 20,1-18]. Jacob steals his brother's primogeniture by deceiving his father [Genesis 27]. After that he deceived his uncle Laban [Genesis 30,25-43].
- **IMPRUDENT BEHAVIOR:** Jephthah kills his daughter as a result of a reckless promise he had made to the Lord [Judges 11].
- **EVIL ACTIONS:** Jael kills Sisara after welcoming him in her tent [Judges 4,17-22]; David was a harsh and cruel warlord [1 Samuel 27,7-11]. In addition, he sent a man to his death to hide the fact that he had slept with his wife [2 Samuel 11] but we read that the Lord considered what David had done to be evil.
- **HATRED AND RESENTMENT:** As a matter of fact, there are not many, but at least we can mention two: The well-known imprecation of Psalm 137,9 ["O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"], or what the prophet Jeremiah asks God for his enemies, "Therefore give their children over to famine; hurl them out to the power of the sword, let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence, their youths be slain by the sword in battle."
- **IMMORAL CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES:** The best-known case is undoubtedly that of the "holy war" [Deuteronomy 20:1-20]. In this Deuteronomy legislation on war, two cases are distinguished: that the city being fought against is near or far. 1. If the city is near, all its inhabitants [men, women and children] must be put to the sword; 2. if the city is far away, it may be offered the option of surrendering and paying tribute; if they do not accept, then when the city is taken, all the men must be put to the sword. As for the women, the children, the cattle, and the rest of the city's riches, they can take them as spoils of war. What shocks us today is that all this is attributed to a command from God that the people of Israel must obey in order to be faithful and for that reason Joshua and other biblical characters are praised. And this is as far as we go with the subject. Let call it a day.

3.3. ... and he lived a thousand years. Really? Problems arising from the narration: History or stories?

There is valuable historical information in the OT accounts, but there are also inaccuracies. Sometimes by mistake of the writer or the copyist when giving a date or a geographical data. This is also the case with us. But even more important is the fact that for the Jews, history had a very special meaning, it was the place of their encounter with God, but it was also the well from which the identity and unity of the people of Israel flowed. Hence, more than historical accuracy in the details, what interests them is the

message they want to convey through the narrative. For example, to emphasize the unity of Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel are brought down from the patriarch Jacob. The truth is that even if Jacob's family and his descendants were very numerous, it does not seem historically possible that this was the case. What is important in this story is the sense of unity that is transmitted by having a common origin but also a common future, the promises of God to the patriarchs.

3.3.1. A few historical inaccuracies

There are other historical inaccuracies that can be pointed out, especially in the first chapters of Genesis, and which can lead to wrong conclusions or generate a certain amount of astonishment among readers. For example:

- When Cain kills Abel he is afraid that the first man who finds him will kill him. However, supposedly there were no other inhabitants on earth.
- Later, we found out that Cain was getting married, but we did not know anything about any woman. This is the first time it is mentioned.
- Shortly thereafter, Cain founds a town and names it after his son, 'Enoch'. It is known that the first cities were not founded until many centuries later.
- Then, Tubal-cain [Genesis 4,22] appears as a "bronze and iron toolmaker," but any author knew [including the biblical authors] that bronze was first used to make weapons and tools and iron began to be worked much later [nearly two thousand years later]. The advent of iron made bronze weapons and tools disappear because iron was more resistant and gave an advantage over bronze.
- The story of the Flood follows, but it is obvious that it did not mean the end of humanity because other peoples and individuals immediately appear in the story.
- As a final example we will mention the genealogies. These lists offer us some disconcerting data about the age of the patriarchs. The ten before the flood live an average of 857 years, with Methuselah reaching the top with 969 years [in later tradition this is rounded up to a thousand]. In contrast, the ten patriarchs following the flood saw their life expectancy drastically cut, an average of "only" 317 years.

These inaccuracies in the story can be explained by various factors such as the author's intention. I will just point out some explanatory clues that may shed light on these episodes.

- Ancient man projects all the great discoveries of humanity into the time of the origins, this is not exclusive to the Jews. The same tendency can be seen in the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, etc. The basic idea behind it is that the past and only the past has a normative value. In Mesopotamia, for example, the idea of progress is conspicuous by its absence. That is why in the OT too, the first city or the forge of bronze and iron is attributed to the period of the origins. We can even say that the OT is more 'modern' because it places these events within history and not in a mythical time and in addition it attributes them to human beings and not to the gods as other peoples do. To prove this, it is enough to

read the [Babylonian](#) or [Egyptian](#) founding myths and even the Greek myths [e.g. Hephaestus is the one who creates and teaches metalwork, stone masonry, forges and sculpture. He was the creative god capable of building from beautiful sculptures to the most intricate mechanisms and devices. He was known as the 'celestial artificer'.].

- Also, the high longevity of the antediluvian patriarchs has parallels in the world of the Ancient Near East. This idea that before the flood life was longer was a common heritage of those peoples. For example, in the list of the Sumerian kings we find that the ten kings before the flood lived an average of 30,000 years [no, I haven't put any extra zero, you read correctly], while those who lived after the flood had their life expectancy limited to a little over 1000 years on average [poor things]. Here again the OT is far more moderate and restrained: 857 years before the flood and 317 years after it. Nevertheless, the idea that the Flood marks a radical change in human longevity remains crystal clear.
- The story of the flood is another interesting aspect. As already mentioned, we can also find stories of a flood in Mesopotamia, but the story of Genesis differs from those stories in at least three fundamental aspects: i) In Mesopotamian stories the punishment of the human being is decided by the assembly of the gods, in the OT it is decided by the one God. ii) The cause of punishment in Mesopotamia is that humans do not let the god Enlil sleep in peace, while in the Bible the reasons for punishment are ethical. iii) The reward for the protagonist is immortality in the Mesopotamian poems while in the Bible it is fertility.

The concept of God offered by Genesis is therefore quite different from that offered by the Mesopotamian poems. And the same can be said of the image of the human being.

3.4. ... But the usual is this

There are several common places, well known to the critics of the OT, to which they systematically go to support their criticism. But it must also be said that there are not as many of them as may appear at first glance. The OT is not that set of sinister books about a revenge-hungry and bloodthirsty God, quite the contrary. Of course, it is not a question of justifying the unjustifiable but of putting it in its right place. And we will see how those attitudes and actions that at first seemed wanted by God will later be condemned by God. In fact, **WHAT PREVAILS IN THE OT TEXTS IS MORALITY AND NOT IMMORALITY**. The ethical sense of the OT is remarkably high, and this can be especially found in the prophets who put their lives on the line to defend the poor and the oppressed. And while there are laws that are, to say the least, puzzling; there are many others that even speak of the love of enemies. If it is true that there are immoral stories, it is not less true that there are many more stories that speak of forgiveness and of commitment to others. This is what abounds the most in the OT and if we take the time to get acquainted with it, we will easily realize it. We will talk about these cases now because they will help us to weigh up the totality of the evidence presented against the OT.

3.4.1. All against one and one against all: Tears and pain.

In the book of Judges, chapters 19-21, we find the narrative of a civil war within the people of Israel. The cause, in brief, was the rape of a concubine of a member of the

tribe of Juda by a Benjamite. The guilty man is asked to be punished but the tribe of Benjamin refuses to hand him over, so the remaining eleven tribes gather to go to war against the tribe of Benjamin. But the Benjamites are formidable warriors and they win in the first confrontation. After the defeat, the eleven tribes come together before the Lord and weep and lament over the defeat. The next day they return to the battlefield to fight the Benjamin tribe and are again defeated. Once again, after the defeat, the eleven tribes meet again before the Lord to weep and mourn for their defeat. But there are no two without three, and the victory goes to the third. The next day, one more time, the eleven tribes return to fight against the tribe of Benjamin and, in this opportunity, thanks to a skillful stratagem they manage to defeat them completely, leaving the tribe of Benjamin almost completely annihilated. And this is where we find the most important part of this story. The eleven tribes that have just obtained a total and absolute victory are reunited before the Lord, in Bethel, as the two other previous times [Judges 21,2-3] and what do you think they did? Did they leap and shout for joy at the victory God had given them? Did they sing joyful songs and celebrate throughout the night? What they did, no doubt, is surprising and still challenges us, civilized citizens of the 21st century. Let us hear it narrated by the text itself:

The people went to Bethel, where they sat before God until evening, raising their voices and weeping bitterly. "Lord, God of Israel," they cried, "why has this happened to Israel? Why should one tribe be missing from Israel today?"

They gathered before God not to celebrate, but to weep inconsolably over the disappearance of a tribe of Israel. Is there anything that we can learn from these 'brutes' ancient men today? How not to be moved by them in the face of the deep and authentic fraternal feeling that appears in these two verses. In the face of this denunciation that in a civil war there are no winners and therefore no joy, but only pain because it is a fratricidal struggle.

3.4.2. Confessions of Innocence. I did not...

The second example of ethical life is taken from the book of Job [chapter 31], which tells what the life of a true Israelite should be. It is a list of reprehensible behaviors that God rejects. Since it is an awfully long chapter, I will limit myself to copying only some of these conducts that are condemned.

'If I have walked with falsehood and my foot has hurried to deceit [...]. if my step has turned aside from the way, and my heart has followed my eyes, and if any spot has clung to my hands; [...] 'If my heart has been enticed by a woman, and I have lain in wait at my neighbor's door; [...] 'If I have rejected the cause of my male or female slaves, when they brought a complaint against me; [...] 'If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the orphan has not eaten from it [...] if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or a poor person without covering, whose loins have not blessed me, and who

was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep; [...] 'If I have rejoiced at the ruin of those who hated me, or exulted when evil overtook them—I have not let my mouth sin by asking for their lives with a curse—if I have raised my hand against the orphan, because I saw I had supporters at the gate...

And so on, this is just a sample. Reading the whole chapter is still extremely useful for us as Christians because it is a source of NT ethics.

3.5. Light at the end of the tunnel? Notes for a sensible answer

Still, all these ethical improvements do not prevent us from continuing to wonder about the problems we have pointed out before. I believe that one possible way to find a solution would be to ask the right questions to the texts and follow proper principles of interpretation. We cannot judge the past with our modern parameters. It is not only unfair but also foolish because it prevents us from understanding them properly. It is clear that God does not want us to reproduce today an Ancient Eastern culture or to behave according to its ethical models. So why do such narratives appear in a holy book?

3.5.1. The OT must be interpreted according to the mentality, ethics, uses and customs of its own time and geographical environment.

Miguel de Cervantes, the best known of Spanish writers, at the beginning of his famous work *Don Quixote*, gives an opinion on another of the great texts of medieval Spanish literature, *La Celestina*. Cervantes says that *La Celestina* would be a "divine book if it covered up more of the human". The people who wrote and compiled the OT were certainly not of that opinion, the OT tells us about the lives of its protagonists with their virtues and defects, in all their stark humanity. It does not hide facts because they were shameful or stained the reputation of a famous person or of God's people. This is a proof of the divine inspiration of these books. These texts tell of the origins of a nation, but unlike what other peoples do, here the failures and sinful aspect of the human being are not hidden. This, in the end, agrees with the need to confess our sins in order to be forgiven and cleansed of them. And these hard accounts that appear in the OT reveal an especially important truth to us and that is that God loves us not because we are good and perfect but in spite of the fact that we are not. Reading the OT comes to our minds what the apostle Paul writes to the Romans [5:8]: "*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*" The OT is a piece of work written more than two millennia ago and which reflects the ethical values, laws and way of life of those people who lived in those times. These ethical values have changed and are not the same in the older texts as in the more modern ones. For example, the practice of "anathema" or total destruction of territory, which is stipulated in the holy war or war of Yahweh, was soon abandoned [if it ever came to be used in the way that the book of Joshua tells it, which most scholars dismiss today because of the testimony offered by archaeology]. Another interesting example of ethical and moral progress can be found in 2 Kings [9-10]. There the revolution of Jehu is presented as something wanted by God. However, a century later the prophet Hosea condemned in God's name that bloodshed [Hosea 1:4].

3.5.2. The OT uses the language, idioms, and rhetoric characteristic of its time.

In relation to the antiquity of the Old Testament texts and the error of imposing our mental molds and schemes on an epoch so far removed in time and space from our own, there is the problem of the modes of expression used by the OT. A famous example of this is the so-called 'Talion Law' [law of retaliation]. This principle, which was widely used in the ancient world [from Babylon to Rome], is considered by most of modern society to be a legalization of revenge '*eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*'. However, the real purpose of this rule was precisely to prevent revenge from going beyond what it should, that is, to ensure that revenge was proportionate to the crime committed. We can illustrate what I am talking about by remembering the song of Lamech, son of Cain, in Genesis 4:23-24:

*'Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.'*

It is this disproportion between an injury or a strike and death that the 'law of talion' seeks to eliminate. The punishment must be proportional to the crime or offence committed, hence '*an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*'. Which is the way they expressed, in accordance with their modes of expression, this principle of proportionality. Have we improved so much ethically with respect to these people?

3.5.3. The OT is still on the way.

The last aspect that I would like to point out briefly is that the OT represents a still imperfect moral stage; the definitive revelation of God has not yet taken place. The definitive revelation of God will come through the person of Jesus. Matthew shows us in his gospel how Jesus explains to his generation and the generations to come the true and authentic meaning of the moral teaching that was in germination in the OT. In the Sermon on the Mount he sets out in a clear and distinct way the new morality that is to govern the lives of his disciples. In this sermon [Matthew 5:21-48] Jesus repeats six times in a row the formula "*You have heard that it was said [...] But I say to you...*". Therefore, the OT is not the absolute moral norm of the Christian, but also for that very reason it should not be a reason for scandal.

IN CONCLUSION

The OT responds to the ability of God's people to understand things. God, in his pedagogy, adapts his revelation to the understanding, knowledge and capabilities of the human beings to whom he addresses himself. He tells them the things they can understand at a given time and, in the form, and manner in which they can understand them. This does not mean, obviously, that He deceives them. When algebra is explained in a primary school to children of year 6, it is not explained to them in the same way as

it is explained to a senior in high school or a student of last year in the mathematics college.

3.6. Sure, but what about God's favoritism towards Israel?

This is one of the main theological problems that many people face when reading the OT and which makes it difficult for them to accept it as sacred scripture valid also for non-Jews. How is it possible that, if God has created all human beings, he will always side with Israel? He seems more than the God who made the universe and the human beings a tribal god who defends his fiefdom. But is that so? If we read the OT, we immediately realize that in the beginning God decidedly sided with Israel, but this does not last indefinitely. From a certain point on, God treats them the same as other peoples, or even more harshly when they allow themselves to be dragged into idolatry. Servitude in Egypt, deportations to Assyria and Babylon, Greek and Roman invasions, destruction of the Temple, etc. A pampered people? Really? Certainly, the story we read in the Bible is not at all that of a spoiled and pampered people but of a people who, through suffering, have learned to love and obey God. It seems wrong to us that God at times defends the people of Israel, a small people in comparison with the great empires that surrounded them, but at the same time it does not seem wrong to us to exploit the countries of the Third World.

On the other hand, the Bible does not offer a monolithic version of the events of its history. As is the case today with our own history, where different researchers offer discordant views on past events. It is therefore not unusual for us in Israel to find different perspectives in judging its past as well. In the OT we can find narratives inflamed by a deep nationalism, which we find scandalous. In their desire to prove that God has a special predilection for Israel, they present a distorted and negative image of the neighboring peoples who are their rivals. In the OT we can find narratives inflamed by a deep nationalism, which we find scandalous. In their desire to prove that God has a special predilection for Israel, they present a distorted and negative image of the neighboring peoples who are their enemies. But they also offer other points of view. Israel is the only people that, by telling its history in a systematic way, begins speaking of the common origin of humanity, presenting all men as brothers scattered throughout the earth. Before there is a chosen people there is a desired humanity.

The prophets, on the other hand, present a more critical view of the history of Israel. They recognize, as it could not be otherwise, that God has greatly blessed His people, but that this is not a reason for complacency but for a more generous response to the blessings received. Moreover, in recalling the history of the people, the prophets do not focus on the evils committed by other peoples but on the sin of Israel. Coming to expressions like the one we find in the prophet Amos, which had to be, to say the least, offensive to his Jewish contemporaries if not blasphemous. Let us read what the prophet Amos wrote to his countrymen [9,7]:

*Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? says the Lord.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,*

and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?

What Israel considers a unique and exclusive episode in world history, its exit from Egypt, is placed at the same level as the emigrations of the Philistines and Syrians, precisely those peoples who were among Israel's greatest enemies. Certainly, Amos is not denying God's intervention on behalf of his people in Egypt, but he is extending it to the history of other countries. In short, he makes sacred the history of the world, thus putting the alleged privileges of Israel on hold. The OT is a large collection of texts from very different periods and written by different authors; therefore, in them we can find very diverse, even opposing, positions. That is why it is not fair that we should be left with only the most negative positions from our perspective. When Jesus, in the synagogue of Nazareth, faces the nationalist positions of those who consider themselves superior to the pagans, does not adduce new arguments, but old ones, based on the examples of Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:24-27). At the Council of Jerusalem, James demonstrates that God also chooses the pagans by quoting a text from Amos (Acts 15:14-19, which quotes Am 9:11-12).

In short, if we care to know the OT, that is, to read it with a minimum of attention and without bias, we will realize that it is not true that God is concerned only and exclusively about His people, since in the pages of the OT we can also see God's love manifested to foreign peoples.

5.3. Unit 3

5.3.1. Berossus, *Babyloniaca*. [from Alexander Polyhistor]

At Babylon there was (in these times) a great resort of people of various nations, who inhabited Chaldæa, and lived in a lawless manner like the beasts of the field. In the first year there appeared, from that part of the Erythræan sea which borders upon Babylonia, an animal destitute¹ of reason, by name Oannes, whose whole body (according to the account of Apollodorus) was that of a fish; that under the fish's head he had another head, with feet also below, similar to those of a man, subjoined to the fish's tail. His voice too, and language, was articulate and human; and a representation of him is preserved even to this day.

This Being was accustomed to pass the day among men; but took no food at that season; and he gave them an insight into letters and sciences, and arts of every kind. He taught them to construct cities, to found temples, to compile laws, and explained to them the principles of geometrical knowledge. He made them distinguish the seeds of the earth, and shewed them how to collect the fruits; in short, he instructed them in every thing which could tend to soften manners and humanize their lives. From that time, nothing material has been added by way of improvement to his instructions. And when the sun had set, this Being Oannes, retired again into the sea, and passed the night in the deep; for he was amphibious. After this there appeared other animals like Oannes, of which Berossus proposes to give an account when he comes to the history of the kings. Moreover Oannes wrote concerning the generation of mankind; and of their civil polity; and the following is the purport of what he said:

5.3.2. Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*. Book 1. 13-16

13 ³ Some of the priests, however, say that Hephaestus was their first king, since he was the discoverer of fire and received the rule because of this service to mankind; for once, when a tree on the mountains had been struck by lightning and the forest near by was ablaze, Hephaestus went up to it, for it was winter-time, and greatly enjoyed the heat; as the fire died down he kept adding fuel to it, and while keeping the fire going in this way he invited the rest of mankind to enjoy the advantage which came from it. ⁴ Then Cronus became the ruler, and upon marrying his sister Rhea he begat Osiris and Isis, according to some writers of mythology, but, according to the majority, Zeus and Hera, whose high achievements gave them dominion over the entire universe. From these last were sprung five gods, one born on each of the five days which the Egyptians intercalate; the names of these children were Osiris and Isis, and also Typhon, Apollo, and Aphroditê; ⁵ and Osiris when translated is Dionysus, and Isis is more similar to Demeter than to any other goddess; and after Osiris married Isis and succeeded to the kingship he did many things of service to the social life of man.

14 ¹ Osiris was the first, they record, to make mankind give up cannibalism; for after Isis had discovered the fruit of both wheat and barley which grew wild over the land along with the other plants but was still unknown to man, and Osiris had also devised the cultivation of these fruits, all men were glad to change their food, both because of the pleasing nature of the newly-discovered grains and because it seemed to

their advantage to refrain from their butchery of one another. 2 As proof of the discovery of these fruits they offer the following ancient custom which they still observe: Even yet at harvest time the people make a dedication of the first heads of the grain to be cut, and standing beside the sheaf beat themselves and call upon Isis, by this act rendering honour to the goddess for the fruits which she discovered, at the season when she first did this. 3 Moreover in some cities, during the Festival of Isis as well, stalks of wheat and barley are carried among the other objects in the procession, as a memorial of what the goddess so ingeniously discovered at the beginning. Isis also established laws, they say, in accordance with which the people regularly dispense justice to one another and are led to refrain through fear of punishment from illegal violence and insolence; 4 and it is for this reason also that the early Greeks gave Demeter the name Thesmophorus,³¹ acknowledging in this way that she had first established their laws.

15 1 Osiris, they say, founded in the Egyptian Thebaid a city with a hundred gates, which the men of his day named after his mother, though later generations called it Diospolis,³² and some named it p⁵¹ Thebes. 2 There is no agreement, however, as to when this city was founded, not only among the historians, but even among the priests of Egypt themselves; for many writers say that Thebes was not founded by Osiris, but many years later by a certain king of whom we shall give a detailed account in connection with his period.³³ 3 Osiris, they add, also built a temple to his parents, Zeus and Hera, which was famous both for its size and its costliness in general, and two golden chapels to Zeus, the larger one to him as god of heaven, the smaller one to him as former king and father of the Egyptians, in which rôle he is called by some Ammon. 4 He also made golden chapels for the rest of the gods mentioned above, allotting honours to each of them and appointing priests to have charge over these. Special esteem at the court of Osiris and Isis was also accorded to those who should invent any of the arts or devise any useful process; 5 consequently, since copper and gold mines had been discovered in the Thebaid, they fashioned implements with which they killed the wild beasts and worked the soil, and thus in eager rivalry brought the country under cultivation, and they made images of the gods and magnificent golden chapels for their worship. 6 Osiris, they say, was also interested in agriculture and was reared in Nysa, a city of Arabia Felix near Egypt, being a son of Zeus; and the name which he bears among the Greeks is derived both from his father and from the birthplace, since he is called Dionysus. 7 Mention is also made of Nysa by the poet in his Hymns, to the effect that it was in the vicinity of Egypt, when he says:

There is a certain Nysa, mountain high,

With forests thick, in Phoenicê afar,

Close to Aegyptus' streams.

8 And the discovery of the vine, they say, was made by him near Nysa, and that, having further devised the proper treatment of its fruit, he was the first to drink wine and taught mankind at large the culture of the vine and the use of wine, as well as the way to harvest the grape and to store wine. 9 The one most highly honoured by him was

Hermes, who was endowed with unusual ingenuity for devising things capable of improving the social life of man.

16 1 It was by Hermes, for instance, according to them, that the common language of mankind was first further articulated, and that many objects which were still nameless received an appellation, that the alphabet was invented, and that ordinances regarding the honours and offerings due to the gods were duly established; he was the first also to observe the orderly arrangement of the stars and the harmony of the musical sounds and their nature, to establish a wrestling school, and to give thought to the rhythmical movement of the human body and its proper development. He also made a lyre and gave it three strings, imitating the seasons of the year; for he adopted three tones, a high, a low, and a medium; the high from the summer, the low from the winter, and the medium from the spring. 2 The Greeks also were taught by him how to expound (hermeneia) their thoughts, and it was for this reason that he was given the name Hermes. In a word, Osiris, taking him for his priestly scribe, communicated with him on every matter and used his counsel above that of all others. The olive tree also, they claim, was his discovery, not Athena's, as the Greeks say.