



Silver and Sandals: Social Justice and the Hebrew Bible (SoR)

15th May 2018

Art Gallery of NSW

Dr. Louise M. Pryke
Macquarie University



INTRODUCTION: SILVER AND SANDALS



Social justice in the Hebrew Bible:
An Approach from the Perspectives of Literary Theory and Social History

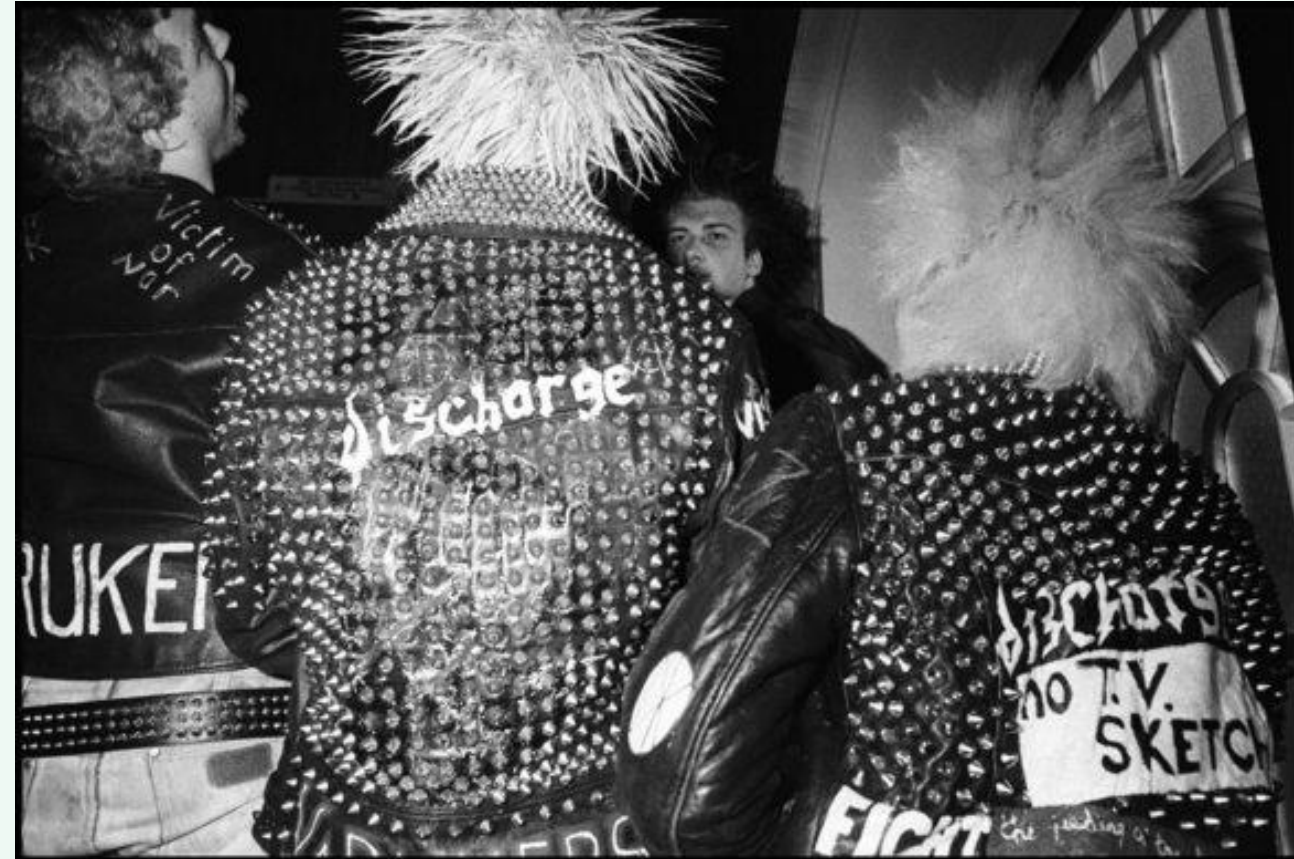




LITERARY THEORY AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

- The application of literary theory to biblical texts has become accepted and widely utilised in past decades.
- This approach was greatly influenced by the publication of Robert Alter's book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* in 1981.
- Although this methodological approach is now entrenched in biblical studies, it is not without critics.
- For an example of criticism, Berlinerblau, J. "The Bible as Literature?" *Hebrew Studies* 45 (2004), pp. 9-26.

Image: Punk fans in Birmingham, 1981.
Possibly celebrating the release of Alter's volume.



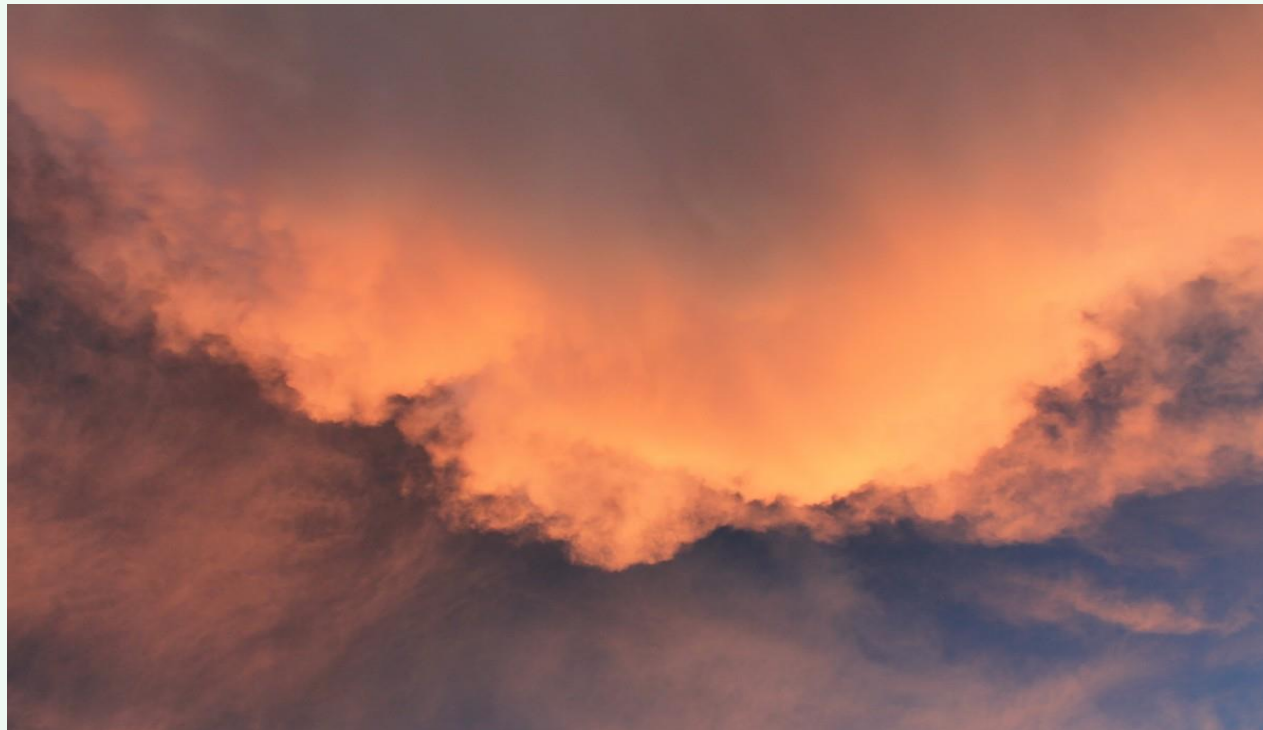


MACQUARIE
University

Why Justice? The Compassionate Nature of God

THE NATURE OF GOD

The literary technique of characterisation is used in the Hebrew Bible to show the nature of God. This is achieved through divine descriptions, contrasts with other deities, God's actions and relationship with the patriarchs, and through covenant and law.



God's nature is also presented through self-revelatory speech.
In Exodus 34, God describes His own nature as compassionate:

Exodus 34: 5

“Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. 6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”



SOCIAL JUSTICE AND BIBLICAL LAW: DEFINING LAW

Among the many legal passages in the Bible are a number that have been identified as independent units by modern scholars.

These include the Ten Commandments, also known as the “Decalogue” (Exod. 20.2–17; Deut. 5.6–21), the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20.22 [or 21:1]–23.19), the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26), and the Deuteronomistic laws (Deut. 12–26).





SOCIAL JUSTICE AND BIBLICAL LAW

God's nature and concern for social justice are further shown in the biblical law codes.

The law codes of Exodus and Leviticus reveal a special concern for the poor and vulnerable in society, and for their protection from abuse.

Image:

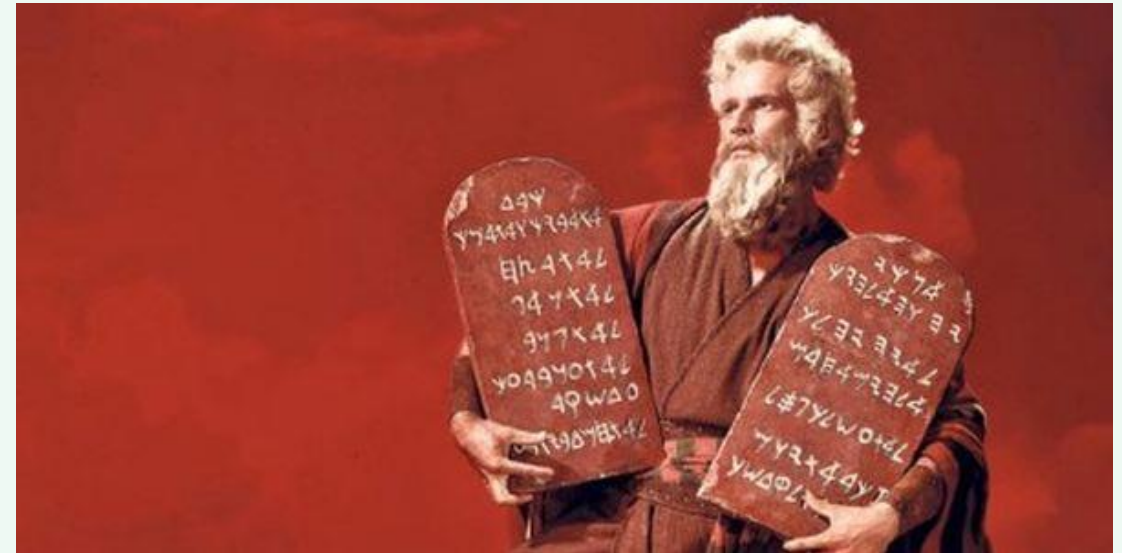
The Justice League at ComicCon 2013. Also concerned with protecting the vulnerable in society.





THE TEN COMMANDMENTS (THE “DECALOGUE”)

- Most of the obligations incumbent upon Israel in the Decalogue deal not with cultic issues, but with the relations between people in an orderly society.
- The Decalogue is distinguished from other law in the Pentateuch as it was given directly by God, rather than through human agency.
- These laws were written uniquely on stone tablets by the ‘finger of God’ (Ex 31: 18).





WIDOWS, ALIENS AND ORPHANS: CONCERN FOR THE SOCIALLY VULNERABLE

Exodus 22: The Covenant Code

21 “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

22 “Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. 23 If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. 24 My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

25 “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest. 26 If you take your neighbour’s cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, 27 because that cloak is the only covering your neighbour has. What else can they sleep in?

When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.”

ANIMAL ETHICS

- The emphasis on fairness and impartiality in Biblical law and the concern for the care of the vulnerable in society are reflected in the relations between humans and animals. Laws involving the treatment of animals have the dual purpose of preventing cruelty and fostering humane feelings in the community.

Image:

A celebres crested macaque, self-portrait.

Interestingly, while on the topic of animal laws, this image was the subject of the monkey selfie case of 2014, revolving around the issue of copyright for animal-made photography.





THE PROPHETIC VISION

As we have seen, the concern for social justice in Judaism is intimately linked with the identification of God as compassionate.

The divine directive to care for the needy is part of biblical law, but it is also transmitted through the words of the prophets, in biblical prophetic literature.

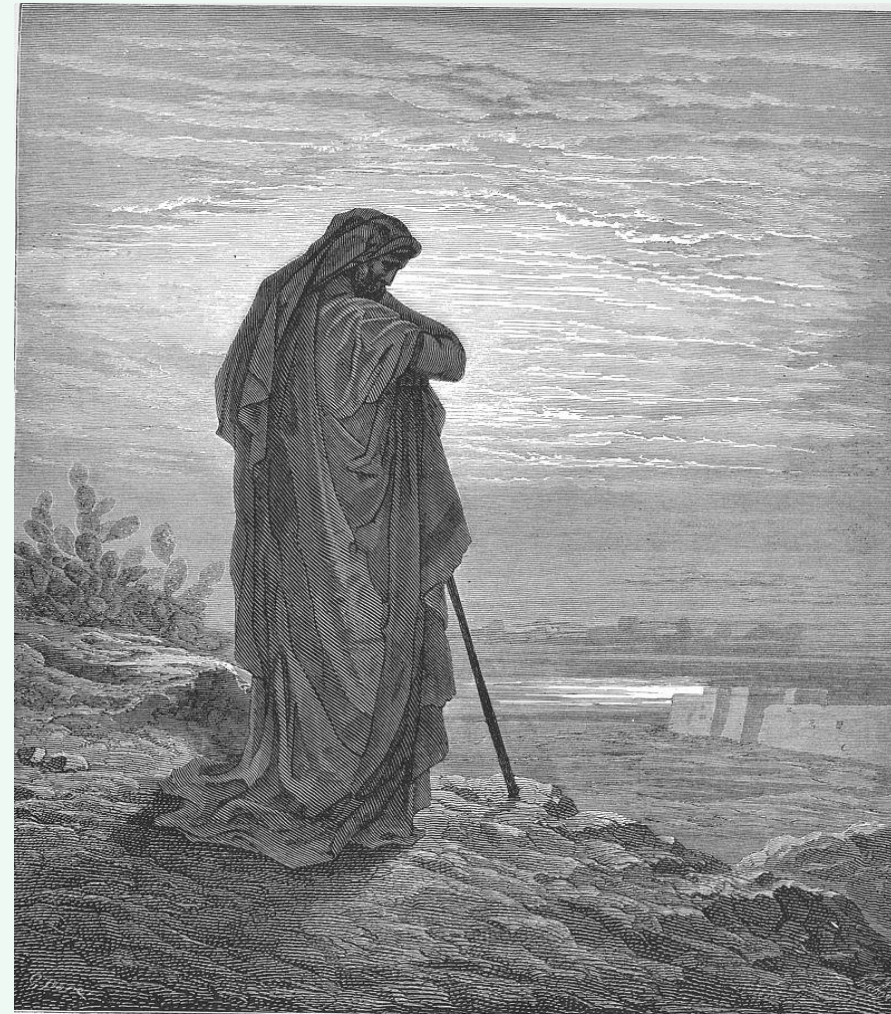


THE BOOK OF AMOS

- The Book of Amos is part of the Hebrew Bible's Prophetic Literature.
- Amos is the third book of the Twelve Minor Prophets.
- Many consider it the oldest of the prophetic books.
- Amos is dominated by the theme of social justice.

Image:

Depiction of the Prophet Amos by Gustave Doré, Doré's English Bible.



THE ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS

- The introductory and concluding chapters of Amos are known as the **Oracles Against the Nations**.
- In these chapters, a terrible catalogue of crimes are listed, including the murder of pregnant women and the desecration of the dead.



Amos 1:

“9 This is what the Lord says:

‘For three sins of Tyre,

even for four, I will not relent.

Because she sold whole communities of captives
to Edom,

disregarding a treaty of brotherhood,

10

I will send fire on the walls of Tyre
that will consume her fortresses.’”



THE CRIMES OF THE NATIONS

- The framing chapters use the literary technique of juxtaposition to contrast Israel and her neighbours.
- Israel is simultaneously presented in the same terms as other nations, with the familiar phrase “For three transgressions...and for four”, while concurrently being exposed as distinct from them.
- While the other nations’ crimes are monstrous, their crimes can be loosely grouped under the heading of war-crimes (Simundson, 2005).
- For Israel, the crimes are not directed against a foreign nation or within the savage context of war, again emphasising their particularly serious nature.

Amos 2:

“For three sins of Moab,
even for four, I will not relent.
Because he burned to ashes
the bones of Edom’s king,
² I will send fire on Moab
that will consume the fortresses of Kerioth.
Moab will go down in great tumult
amid war cries and the blast of the trumpet.
³ I will destroy her ruler
and kill all her officials with him,”
says the LORD.



THE CRIMES OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH

Amos 2:

6 “For three sins of Israel,
even for four, I will not relent.
They sell the innocent for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.

7

They trample on the heads of the poor
as on the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed.

Father and son use the same girl
and so profane my holy name.

8

They lie down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge.
In the house of their god
they drink wine taken as fines.”



CHIASMS AND COVENANT CRIMES

The Covenant Code of Exodus:

“For six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild beasts may eat.”

(Exodus 23:10-11)



Amos 8:

4 “Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land,

5 saying,

‘When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain,

and the Sabbath be ended

that we may market wheat?’—

skimping on the measure,

boosting the price

and cheating with dishonest scales,

6

buying the poor with silver

and the needy for a pair of sandals,

selling even the sweepings with the wheat.”

TIKKUN OLAM: REPAIR OF THE WORLD

**When we
heal the earth,
we heal
ourselves.**

-David Orr



Conclusion

Considering the theme of social justice from the perspective of literary theory and social history presents the opportunity follow the significance of this theme from the Hebrew Bible to Tikun Olam.

Social justice in Judaism is rooted in the compassionate nature of God, and the relationship between God and the Jewish people. From the law codes and prophecy of the Hebrew Bible to modern day Judaism, reflecting the compassionate nature of God is not purely an ideological concept, but is fundamentally connected to the actions of the individual and the community.





Thank you very much.
