

In the Middle Ages, as everyone knows, the Bible was under lock and key. The clergy kept it away from the masses, lest it confuse them and lead to schism and sedition. Their point of view, repugnant as it is to us, children of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, was not without substance. If the medieval fathers look down from the Heaven in which they so devoutly believed, they must point as justification to the turbulence that broke out after the Bible was translated into the vernacular and common people were encouraged to read it. Dispute over the Word of God burst into flame. The world witnessed its bloodiest religious wars.

Maybe it's time to lock the Holy Book up again, at least until the Israeli-Arab dispute is settled. The trouble is that the Bible is like the Delphic oracle, unendingly ambiguous, and all things to all men, so that - as the old adage has it - the devil can quote Scripture to his purpose.

From a secular point of view, this seems natural in a book made up of many books, written at different stages in the unfolding of a great religious experience. How to explain it from a theological point of view must be left to our ecclesiastical superiors, for if it is literally the Word of God, His contradictions, too, are infinite.

These contradictions now play their part in the efforts at peace in the Middle East. At one end of the spectrum the Bible preaches justice and universal brotherhood. At the other end it contains some of the most primitive and bloodthirsty ethnocentric teachings in human literature. So Menachem Begin, Israel's fundamentalist prime minister and the religious parties on which he depends for a thin and precarious parliamentary majority, claim that they cannot give up the West Bank because God gave it to the Jews.

This can, of course, be supported from Bible texts. Indeed, if we are to go back to a literal reading of Holy Writ for guidance in the Middle East conflict, the religious ultras of the Israeli community can find much else along the same lines, and in the same direction, though carried to lengths that would make even the most fanatical among them quail. It is, of course, true that in the final chapter of Numbers God gave the whole of Canaan west of the Jordan to Israel. But if the Word of God is to be taken literally, those who now dwell on the West Bank may tremble. For only three short chapters earlier, the Lord says "ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy their holy places and 'dispossess' them."

Nor is that all. Numbers 33 ends with the fiercest warning of all. If the children of Israel do not dispossess the inhabitants, "I shall do unto you as I thought to do unto them." If the Jews do not drive out the Canaanites, God will drive out the Jews. This is the harsh theology of depopulating a land to make room for one's own.

To base modern politics on fundamentalist readings of the Bible is to invite fundamentalist readings of the Koran. It is to open the doors to a plague of bigotries. Selected scriptural texts were used in less enlightened times to excuse pogroms of Jews, and Holy War against infidels, and the conflict of Catholic and Protestant that made a wasteland of 16th century Germany, and is making a wasteland today of 20th-century Ulster. There is no end to the wickedness that bigotry can draw from Holy Writ. This is not the least of the reasons for remembering that Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, made separation of church and state a basic principle.

Of course, those who seek Arab-Jewish reconciliation and peace may also find their message in the Bible. Isaiah said, "Zion shall be redeemed by justice," and this means justice, too, for our Arab brothers. But if we are not ready for such healing and fraternal counsels, let us lock the Holy Book up again, until we can show ourselves fit to read it.