

Old Testament Ethical Issues – Brutality



In 2 Kings 2:23–25, the prophet Elisha called two female bears out of the forest to maul forty-two children after they mocked him by calling him “baldhead.” In the KJV, these victims are described as “little children,” implying innocence and youth. However, the NIV softens this by translating them as “some youths,” framing them more like delinquent young men who mocked Elisha and were justly punished. This suggests an intentional translation choice to mitigate Elisha’s action.



Although Elisha frequently appears in Kings and is considered a prominent prophet in the New Testament, his name is entirely absent from Chronicles. This omission may indicate that the Chronicler disapproved of Elisha’s conduct as a prophet, or that he regarded the miracles attributed to him as highly questionable, thus excluding him altogether. Indeed, by modern historical standards, the historical books of the Old Testament are less objective history than theological-literary compositions.

Deuteronomy 21:18–21 prescribes that “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not heed them... all the men of his city shall stone him to death. So you shall put away the evil from among you.” If someone believed, according to the so-called infallible Law of Yahweh, that they could deal with their children’s lives and rights as they pleased, it would be hard for a literalist believer in the Old Testament to condemn them.

Regarding a father’s right to dispose of his child, Genesis records Abraham nearly killing Isaac but failing to carry it out. In contrast, Judges 11 tells of Jephthah, who vowed to Yahweh that if he returned victorious from battle against the Ammonites, he would offer as a burnt offering the first person to greet him. Tragically, that turned out to be his own daughter. Without hesitation, he slaughtered her and burned her on the altar. Yet, “burnt offerings must be male animals, and even male animals born after a female from the same mother are disqualified as offerings.”¹ How, then, could a virgin girl be offered as a burnt sacrifice? This not only contradicts the sacrificial laws but also reflects the male preference and disregard for female life embedded in ancient society.



Deuteronomy 22:20–21 prescribes that if a bride is found not to be a virgin, “the men of her city shall stone her to death” at her father’s doorstep. In an era without any scientific means to determine virginity, this law provided no reliable standard, yet sanctioned killing women based solely on unproven suspicion—an inhumane and arbitrary rule.

“Abraham failed to kill Isaac, but King Ahaz of Judah (reigned 735–715 BCE) sacrificed his own son by burning him in the fire” (2 Kings 16:3). Biblical scholars have shown that such practices were not isolated pagan rites but part of a broader religious complex intended to secure prosperity and

blessing from the gods.² Ezekiel 20:25–26 records Yahweh saying, “I gave them statutes that were not good, and rules by which they could not have life. And I defiled them through their very gifts in making them offer up all their firstborn, that I might devastate them.” This shows that as late as the 590s BCE, Israelites were still following Yahweh’s laws that required offering the firstborn as burnt sacrifices—laws which Ezekiel explicitly denounced as wrong.

Numbers 5:11–31 contains a trial-by-ordeal for a wife suspected of infidelity without evidence. The priest was to mix “holy water” with dust from the tabernacle floor and curses written on a scroll, then make the woman drink this bitter concoction. If her abdomen swelled and her thigh wasted away, she was declared guilty; if not, she was innocent. One wonders if any woman could physically survive such a test unscathed.

Yahweh’s punishments for disobedience include horrific threats: “You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters” (Leviticus 26:27–29). Deuteronomy 28 expands this curse: verses 53–55 depict a man eating his own children in secret, and verse 57 describes a woman secretly eating her newborn. Isaiah 9:20 says, “Each will feed on the flesh of his own offspring.” The Qur’an (17:31), addressing the same theme, contrasts sharply in tone: “Do not kill your children for fear of poverty,” demonstrating a humane ethic absent from these Old Testament laws.

Ezekiel 5:10 states, “Fathers will eat their children, and children will eat their fathers.” Several place names mentioned in Ezekiel—Tel-Abib near the Kebar River (3:15), Diblah/Diblah (6:14), and Bamah (20:29)—did not exist in Old Testament times. Since these names occur only in Ezekiel and nowhere else in Scripture, it raises the possibility that parts of the text were later additions.

Ezekiel 1:5–10 describes “four living creatures,” reminiscent of Daniel’s “four great beasts” (Daniel 7:3–7) and Revelation’s “four living creatures” (Revelation 4:6–7 KJV/NIV). The apocalyptic style and narrative structure are strikingly similar. The command in Ezekiel 9:4 to mark foreheads parallels Revelation’s “mark on the forehead or hand.” Ezekiel 14:14 and 14:20 name Noah, Daniel, and Job—yet the mention of Daniel is puzzling enough that some footnotes suggest it could mean “Danel.” This indicates the book’s author likely lived after Daniel’s time.

The animals in Ezekiel and Revelation—lion, ox, eagle, and human—are identical, suggesting literary

borrowing. Daniel's beasts differ in species but share the motif of four symbolic creatures.

Regarding warfare, 2 Samuel 2:12–17 records that twelve young men from each side—David's and Ish-bosheth's—faced off, grabbed each other's heads, and stabbed each other simultaneously, resulting in twenty-four deaths. Joab and Abner had agreed to this duel beforehand (2:14), and immediately after, "the battle was fierce" (2:17). This seems less like a military necessity than a provocative contest, akin to a dangerous game designed to inflame hostilities, functioning like a stimulant that incites violence.³

References

¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, Prometheus Books, 1999, p. 78

² Israel Finkelstein & Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, trans. Oh Seong-hwan, Kkachi Publishing, 2002, p. 283

³ Jongrok Lee, *Everyday Violence, Violent Religion*, Qumran Publishing, 2017, p. 191