

# An Eye for an Eye?

by

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If I were to ask you, **“What is your favorite verse out of the Bible?”** would you be able to tell me? Most of you would.

But, what if I were to ask you to **name a verse out of the Bible that is your least favorite, in fact, a verse you may not like at all?** Could you do it? Are there any passages in the Old or New Testaments which you could just as well do without, which you would be happy never to read or hear again? If you are honest, then you know your answer is, “Yes!” There are so many statements in the Bible, from so many different points of view, about so many different topics, that it is impossible for anyone to avoid occasionally bumping up against some passage or other that upsets us, offends us, confuses us, or at the very least seems to waste our time.

After 38 years of preaching from the Bible, I, myself, have a whole list of passages that I sometimes refer to as **“The Scriptures I Love to Hate.”** For example, there are **all those “begat” passages** in the Old Testament, such as chapters 5 and 11 of Genesis. You know: So-and-so begat so-and-so. Maybe I'm just getting older, but I've discovered that after a while all that begetting gets boring!

**At the very top of my list, however, are all of the “eye for an eye” and “tooth for a tooth” passages in the Old Testament. They bother me not so much for what they say, but because they are so often cited by people who really have no idea what those scriptures meant in their original Hebrew context, nor what they should mean for Jews or Christians today. Experience has shown that most people who are fond of quoting the Bible’s statements about an eye for an eye are not acting theologically in a manner which properly serves their deity, but are instead acting ideologically in a manner which uses their deity as an excuse to serve their own selfish purposes of giving a divine blessing to their very human prejudices and hatreds.**

This morning I want us to shake off the influence of all of the television shows and movies and right-wing conservative talk-show hosts that pander to humanity's lowest animalistic instincts for rage and violence, and see if we can allow ourselves once again to come under the influence and inspiration of the world's greatest religious sages, people like the man from Nazareth, and the man who sat beneath the Bodhi Tree.

But first, let us examine those troublesome passages.

**There are only three places in the Old Testament which discuss the “eye for an eye” doctrine. The first is the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Exodus.** In verses 22 through 25 the story goes that **Moses** told the Hebrews that if a pregnant woman is hurt during a fight between men, then the men who hurt her “shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

**The second passage is found in Leviticus, chapter 24, verses 17 through 20:** “He who kills a man shall be put to death. When a man causes a disfigurement in his neighbor, as he has done, so shall it be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.”

**Finally, in the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy (vss. 15-21),** Moses tells his people that any person giving false evidence during a trial against another person shall suffer the punishment that would have been given to the accused: “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand.”

**Instead of merely memorizing these phrases and spouting them as some do trying to justify their own sinful thirst for violence and hatred, if they would take the time to study such scriptures in their historical context, they would come away surprised by two important revelations: *first*, that in its original Hebrew context, around 1200 B.C.E., what should properly seem to us, today, to be the savage doctrine of an eye for an eye was not, back then, cruel at all, but just the opposite; and *second*, compared with the teachings of Jesus and Gautama, this doctrine, nevertheless, remains unbelievably crude and primitive today, despite its being a “biblical” doctrine.**

The truth of the matter is that **you and I live in an almost indescribably violent and hate-filled world. It has always been so, and it always will be.** As Americans, we lead rather sheltered lives compared to most of the other people on this planet. Most Americans have never been arrested, tortured or murdered by their own governing officials (although we all should be ashamed to have to admit that we now know that our own governing officials have sanctioned such atrocities against foreigners). On those rare occasions when some of us do run into trouble with the law, we expect to be, and usually are well-treated. We have our rights read to us and are allowed to have our defense attorney near at hand. Even if we are guilty of some terrible crime, we expect to be tried before a jury of our peers and by due process. On the slim chance that we might actually be convicted of something, we still expect to do no more than pay a fine or go to jail. With the controversial exception of the death penalty, we have absolutely no expectation whatsoever of having to suffer any kind of cruel or unusual punishment.

But, in most of the world, this is not the case. In many Latin and South American countries human rights are not recognized, due process does not exist, and torture is common. In many Arab nations where Islamic fundamentalists exercise power, cruel and unusual punishments are the rule, not the exception. Get caught stealing, and your right hand will be chopped off. Commit rape, and you will be buried up to your neck in sand and then stoned to death. Commit adultery, and you can expect to be beheaded. [Laffin] **Throughout the world today, and throughout the long history of humanity, the dominant tradition has never been one of trying to fit the punishment to the crime, much less has it involved the notion of rehabilitating the offender. The dominant approach has always been one of allowing the officials to exercise their unlimited desire for vengeance and retribution.**

**As readers of the Old Testament, what we must remember is that this was the case in Palestine in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E. when Moses supposedly revealed Yahweh’s eye for an eye commandment. Relatively speaking, the ancient Hebrews were a primitive, almost barbaric people living among other similarly unsophisticated nations.** [Greenburg; Greengus; Huffman; McKenzie; Renger; Rylaarsdam; von Rad; Westbrook] Infanticide was not unknown among them. Slavery was an accepted practice. Even the master’s wife and children were considered property which could be bought or sold. **Justice was conducted on the basis of blood feuds. Retribution knew no limits.** Typical of this ancient mentality was the speech of Lamech who boasted to his many wives: “I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain was avenged 7-fold, then I am avenged 77-fold!” [Gen. 4:23f.]

Into this chaos Moses supposedly came, preaching **Yahweh’s law which limited retribution to only an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.** Far from setting up a standard of cruel and unusual punishment, **Moses was trying to soften the outrageous punishments that were already common. His was a humane attempt to get the Hebrews to fit the punishment to the crime.** After all, how much better it would be only to lose an eye or a tooth for some petty offense than to be stoned to death! **In sharp contrast to so many vigilante-minded death-dealers today who demand an eye for an eye and who forget the biblical injunction that vengeance is Yahweh’s alone to pursue** (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19; etc.), **Moses’ purpose was to replace the primitive notion of vengeance with the more sophisticated notion of justice.** As harsh as the doctrine of an eye for

an eye ought to seem to us today, during Moses' time it was a bold attempt to humanize and soften what was a terribly brutal and unjust social policy concerning crime and punishment. That should be our *first revelation*: despite its apparent harshness, 3,200 years ago this doctrine appeared as one of the most humane inventions yet created. **It saved the lives and unnecessary suffering of thousands of people and helped bring humanity out of its ethical infancy and into its ethical childhood.**

Nevertheless, childhood is not adulthood, and adolescence is not yet maturity. Moses took the Hebrews as far as he could along the road to ethical wisdom. After that it was left to the **prophets** and the **rabbis** to teach **the real meaning of justice**. They did this in part by pointing out that **true justice cannot be achieved on the basis of equal retaliation**. After all, no two eyes, no two hands are ever the same, ever of equal value. The loss of sight to a criminal can never be compared to the blindness he might have inflicted upon an artist he had attacked. **Justice demands compensation, not retaliation.**

After Moses, various Jewish prophets and sages arose whose wisdom built upon and transcended his, bringing people out of their ethical childhood, into adulthood. (Cf. Micah 6:8). One of those remarkable individuals was named **Jesus**. Expanding upon the Mosaic tradition which said: "You shall not hate your brother in your heart," "you shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge," "but you shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Lev. 19:17f.], **Jesus taught that there is something even more important than simple retributive justice: that, of course, is love**. While the infantile Lamech had loudly boasted of achieving his 77-fold measure of vengeance against a boy who had struck him, and the ethically childlike Moses had only demanded that justice be limited to retaliation in the exact measure of the crimes, **Jesus taught that ethically mature adults should be willing to forgive each other 70 times 7.** [Mt. 18:22]

In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus put Moses' law into a broader perspective: "You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." [Mt. 5:38-41]

Similarly, he said: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment." [Mt. 5:21-f.]

**The Jewish prophets, rabbis, and Jesus were not alone in achieving this mature ethical knowledge. Many of the great leaders from all of the world's major religions understood these things, and some did it before the Common Era.**

Listen to these words of the **Buddha** and notice how similar they are to the words you know as coming from Jesus: "Consider others as yourself." [Borg, 15; cf. Lk. 6:31] "If anyone should give you a blow with his hand, with a stick, or with a knife, you should abandon any desires and utter no evil words." [Borg, 17; cf. Lk. 6:29] "Hatreds do not ever cease in this world by hating, but by love... Overcome anger by love, overcome evil by good." [Borg, 19; cf. Lk. 6:27ff.] "Abandon the taking of life." [Borg, 23; cf. Mt. 26:52] "Abstain from killing." [Borg, 31; cf. Mk. 10:19] "Cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let your thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world." [Borg, 25; cf. Jn. 15:12f.]

3,000 years ago it was acceptable for people to speak in terms of an eye for an eye. To paraphrase the apostle **Paul** [1 Cor. 13]: **when human beings were culturally immature, we spoke as children, thought as children, and reasoned as children. But now, in 2006, when we**

**hear some people still speaking about vengeance, still demanding justice in the form of an eye for an eye, then you and I must recognize that these individuals have not yet grown up ethically. They have not yet—as Paul says—put away their childish things.**

Let me close, then, with **a true story.**

In 1956, the adoptive parents of a 7-year-old boy were told by their doctor that their son had glaucoma, a terribly painful disease. The doctor said that he was sorry, but that there was nothing he could do: the diseased eye would have to be removed. Out of her desperate concern that her son's future not be damaged by so great a handicap, **the mother begged the doctor to take one of her own good eyes and transplant it into the boy.** She collapsed in tears when the doctor explained that such an exchange was not possible. Neither the doctor nor the mother knew that the boy had been able (through the opening of an unclosed door) to see and hear all of their conversation—but, I did; and **ever after that, the words, “an eye for an eye,” have made me think of love, not hate.**

**As Unitarian Universalists, you and I should understand that we are not called to live in the shadow of death spelled out by the Old Testament's injunction to take an eye for an eye. We are called to live in the light of a modern world whose medical marvels now include giving an eye for an eye—in the form of cornea transplants.** Today, when we hear those words, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” we should not “put down” another human being by execution. We should hold up hope for another human being by signing a donor card which stipulates that in our love, we are ready, willing, and able to contribute not only an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, but also a kidney for a kidney, a lung for a lung, and a heart for a heart. That is the mature ethical understanding of justice in a world where all that we have in the way of bodily organs was freely given to us at no cost to ourselves except the underlying human obligation to love one another.

**The next time someone tries to defend the death penalty to you, remember our First U.U. Principle which calls us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every human being; and tell them that you are ethically too mature to be satisfied by infantile, hate-filled revenge. Tell them that there is something stronger than hate, better than vengeance, and more modern than Moses: it is the power of love.**

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