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## Biblical Games: Game Theory and the Hebrew Bible

By Steven J. Brams

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Years ago, I read a documentary-like novel entitled *Games People Play*.<sup>1</sup> The word ‘game’ in the title did not refer to games like soccer, checkers or card games, but to tricks and moves in human interrelationships. Reading the updated reprint of Brams’ 1982 monograph<sup>2</sup> reminded me of that novel. Brams is looking for a rational interpretation of various biblical stories, since he is not at ease with the current faith-oriented or narrative interpretation of these stories. He sees these interpretations as overly subjective. He uses a form of game-theory to clarify the moves and tricks made the characters in a story—including God. Eventually he defends the thesis that these characters – including God – do not act in a haphazard way, but that their moves can be interpreted as the outcome of a rational process of weighing the possibilities.

To reach this goal, Brams makes the unusual, but fascinating move to apply a mathematical theory to biblical texts. It should be noted that this theory was designed as an instrument for decision-making on the level of politics and economy.<sup>3</sup> The central tenet of this theory is that seemingly complex situations can be reduced to two or three pivotal decisions, formalised in a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ scheme. For example: in the Book of Genesis, God had a choice between giving constraints to human beings or not giving them (formalised as I-impose constraints, and not-I-impose constraints). Adam and Eve thereafter were free to choose between obedience and disobedience (formalised as O and not-O). This implies that four outcomes are possible: I,O; I/not-O; not-I/O and not-I/not-O. These four outcomes can be assessed as best/next to best/next to worst/worst for the character under consideration, or in a scale: 4,3,2,1. This implies that the ‘game’ of imposing constraints and (dis)obedience in Gen. 2–3 can be summarised in a scheme, visualised in figure 1.

Subsequently, Brams plays the ‘what if . . .’-card. If God were able to anticipate the reaction of Adam and Eve, what had He done to bring his aim within reach? In the case under consideration, one would expect God to anticipate human

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1. E. Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships* (Hammondsworth 1969).

2. S.J. Brams, *Biblical Games: Game Theory and the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge MA 1982).

3. J. von Neumann and O. Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour* (Princeton 1944).

Figure 1: The ‘game’ of imposing constraints and (dis)obedience

		Adam and Eve	
		Obedience	Disobedience
God	Impose	Adam and Eve obedient God approving (3,2)	Adam and Eve disobedient God disapproving (2,3)
	Not Impose	Adam and Eve voluntarily restrained God very pleased (4,1)	Adam and Eve unrestrained God very displeased (1,4)

disobedience; and thus, God could best impose constraints on Adam and Eve, to which they would then react with disobedience. This gives the next best outcome for both parties. Brams gives quite a number of examples of Biblical games that he analyses by applying this scheme—sometimes with refreshing results.

Some criticism, however, is in order. Brams presents his procedure as an objective exercise to be favoured over a faith-motivated reading of the biblical texts. I would like to challenge his claim. Pivotal to his argument is the ranking of the possible outcomes in the classifications: best/next to best/next to worst/worst for the character under consideration, or in a scale: 4,3,2,1. This ranking is, however, subjective and certainly not logical in all cases. Brams argues at length that some outcome would be ‘best’ or ‘4’. However, not in all cases is it immediately clear what the best outcome would be for each player in the game. Classifying the outcomes is a subjective move made by an external player.

One of the Biblical Games Brams discusses is the story of Jephthah’s daughter in the Book of Judges. Brams formalises this ‘text of terror’<sup>4</sup> in a game between Jephthah making the choice between offering his daughter or not and God relenting or not relenting. This is, in my view, an incorrect interpretation. In the end an offering is not even narrated in Judg. 11. It would be better to construe this story as a ‘game of vow’. God has to choice between giving victory over the Ammonites or not and as a result of that Jephthah is urged to fulfil his vow or not.

It is interesting to note that the implication of Brams’ view is as follows: God and human beings alike are free in making their choices as long as they follow the rules. In other words, Brams’ exercise can be used, or, for that matter, abused, as a free-will defence.

The final question is whether or not Brams succeeds in making plausible that God acts in a logical way. In my view Brams is unsuccessful in this regard. In his final chapter he draws a picture of God as a character acting in a haphazard

4. See Ph. Tribble, *Texts of terror: literary-feminist readings of biblical narratives* (Philadelphia 1984).

way. Frankly spoken, such a picture is inevitable given (1) the depiction of YHWH in the Hebrew Bible as a 'Holy God', which implies that in the end God cannot be conceived of in any one-dimensional way; and (2) due to the fact that we encounter in the Hebrew Bible not the divine being itself, but Israel witnessing to its experience, sometimes in the form of the core testimony to God's sovereignty and solidarity, but sometimes in the form of a counter testimony to divine absence, ambiguity and negativity.<sup>5</sup>

Brams' monograph is intriguing; it may not be convincing, but it is certainly worth reading.

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5. See W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis 1997).