

Ethical Criticism of the Bible
The Case of Divinely Mandated Genocide

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Many Christians believe that the Hebrew Bible – the collection of writings they refer to as the Old Testament (OT) – contains a faithful record of God’s dealings with his chosen people. Yet there are disturbing OT texts¹ in which the God of Israel (Yahweh²) is represented as mandating genocide³, commanding the Israelites to lay waste to whole cities, killing men, women, children, and even animals. Given the nature of these stories, one might have thought it obvious – just on moral grounds – that the Bible contains grave errors. But some well known and highly respected Christian philosophers are reluctant to draw that conclusion. Richard Swinburne speaks for many when he says that, as the Giver of life, God has a right to take it, and also the right to assign the task of taking life to others. Applying this doctrine to biblical texts, Swinburne writes: “God therefore has the right to order the Israelites to kill the Canaanites” (2011: 224).⁴

Even if this is correct, it is not by itself (as I am sure Swinburne would agree) sufficient to dispose of the problem posed by the genocide texts. A perfectly good and wise God would not exercise a “right” to command genocide unless he had very good reasons for doing so. The crucial question, then, is whether it is at all plausible to suppose that God had reasons compatible with his goodness and wisdom for commanding the annihilation of various ancient peoples.⁵

As we shall see, the genocide texts themselves give reasons for these divine commands. They do not seem to me to be good reasons, but some Christian philosophers defend them (Craig 2007; Copan 2008; and Swinburne 2011). Others speculate about possible reasons that go well beyond those given in the texts (Stump 2011), and still others stress the limits of human knowledge, arguing that God *might have had*

¹ See, for example, Deut. 7:1-5, 20:16; Josh. 11:15, 6:20-21; Num. 31:8-18; and 1 Sam. 15:1-5. All biblical citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, as given in the *Oxford Annotated Bible* (Metzger and Coogan 1991).

² *YHWH* is the English transliteration of the Tetragrammaton (the four Hebrew letters representing the proper name of the God of Israel), and *Yahweh* is the standard scholarly guess as to the correct pronunciation. Most English Bibles render *YHWH* as “the LORD” (small caps). This is differentiated from “the Lord”, which is used to translate the Hebrew *Adonai*. “Lord” comes to us from the Greek *kurios*, which the Septuagint uses to render *YHWH*.

³ Some people object to the use of the word “genocide” in this context, arguing that God’s intentions were good and/or that obedience to a divine command is not wrong. However, the Oxford English Dictionary defines “genocide” as “the deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group” (OED 2010). That is the precise sense in which I am using the term here.

⁴ The line taken by Swinburne in this context may surprise readers familiar with his work on revelation. Swinburne has a sophisticated hermeneutical apparatus – one that in no way requires biblical literalism or inerrancy (Swinburne (1992) and (2011)). In his most recent statement on the subject, Swinburne continues to approve of some of the metaphorical and allegorical interpretations given by Origen (2011: 222). However, when he turns his attention to the Canaanites, the line he takes is hardly distinguishable from that of biblical inerrantists like Paul Copan (2008) or William Lane Craig (2007).

⁵ I assume the falsity of the most extreme form of divine voluntarism. If you think there are no restrictions – not even ones internal to the divine nature – on what God can do and still be “good”, then you will not be troubled by the problem discussed in this paper. Your problem will be a different one – that of giving any significance at all to the claim that God is good.

morally sufficient reasons that are partly, or even entirely, beyond our ken (Murphy 2011 and Plantinga 2011).⁶ In the present paper I shall take issue with responses of all three sorts.

Disclaimer

Before proceeding further, it is my duty to warn the reader that I am not a biblical scholar. I have no special expertise with respect to the dating, authorship, provenance, or historical accuracy of these texts, and will not be principally engaged with the work of those who do. I will not, for instance, enter into a scholarly debate about the origin and the precise significance of the *herem*, or “ban”, in which a defeated people and its possessions were “devoted to destruction.” Whether or not it has a sacrificial meaning (Collins 2003), the *herem* clearly involves a lot of killing of humans by humans – which is what matters to the argument of this paper.

The consensus of mainstream biblical scholarship appears to be that the genocides did not take place as described in the biblical texts.⁷ I assume that this is correct, but it does nothing to remove the ethical problem I am concerned with here. It is an unavoidable, if uncomfortable, fact that divinely mandated genocide is included in a founding story that the ancient Israelites told themselves – a story that has helped to shape the theological traditions of both Jews and Christians. If the deity featured in that story sometimes commands genocide, then it makes perfectly good sense to ask whether – *as portrayed in this story* – he is worthy of worship.⁸

To feel the full force of the problem, it will be necessary to remind ourselves of what some of these troubling texts say.

“Show them no mercy.”

Speaking to the people on behalf of Yahweh about what is to be done with the Canaanites, Moses says they are to be *utterly destroyed*. The Israelites are to “make no covenant with them” and are to “show them no mercy” (Deut. 7:1-2). Later on, Moses makes a distinction between cities that are far away, and those that God has given Israel “as an inheritance.” In the former case, the cities are to be offered a choice. If they agree to make peace and do forced labor for the Israelites, their lives will be spared. But if they refuse these terms, Moses gives these instructions. They are to kill all the men (Deut. 20:13); but they are to take everyone and everything else of value as “booty”.

You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here (Deut. 20:14-15).

⁶ Murphy appeals to the “skeptical theism” of Michael Bergmann (Bergmann 2009) to establish that our grasp of “intrinsic value and the means of realizing it” is insufficient to warrant the judgment that God acted in careless disregard of the intrinsic value of Canaanite persons (Murphy 2011: 154-7). Murphy also argues that God could not have violated the rights of ancient peoples, since he and they did not belong to the same “dikaiological order.”

⁷ Here are a few examples of what noted biblical scholars have to say on this topic.

“Archaeological work in the land of Israel has demonstrated that the conquest of Canaan as described in the book of Joshua simply did not happen” (Anderson 2011: 271). Anderson adds: “It is rare indeed for Biblical scholars to agree on almost any question, but historical critical scholars are virtually unanimous on this one” (271, fn. 4).

“The law of herem in Deuteronomy,” is “a utopian law which was written in retrospect” (Weinfeld 1993: 154). It “was never put into practice” and “originated in a theoretical manner a few centuries after the wars of Israel in Canaan” (152,160). “[I]n practice, the inhabitants of the Canaanite cities were not destroyed but rather placed under corvée labor...” (152).

“The texts are not naïve reflections of primitive practice but programmatic ideological statements from the late seventh century B.C.E. or later. We can no longer accept them as simply presenting what happened” (Collins 2003: 11).

⁸ If the reader is interested in what biblical scholars have to say about the issue addressed in this paper, a particularly good place to begin is an article by Eryl Davies (Davies 2005). His extensive bibliography is also quite useful.

The nearby cities – those that are to be part of Israel proper – are to be treated even more harshly. In these cities, Moses tells them not to “let anything that breathes remain alive” (Deut. 20:16).

Why would God command a thing like this? The text is quite explicit. The passage just quoted continues:

You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God (Deut. 20:17-18).

What are these “abhorrent things?”⁹ Two in particular have caught the eye of prominent Christian philosophers: child sacrifice and temple prostitution. Deuteronomy 12:31 mentions child sacrifice in passing: “They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.” Elsewhere there seem to be references to temple prostitution. First Kings 14:24 says that there were “male temple prostitutes in the land” during the reign of King Rehoboam.

Citing these texts, Richard Swinburne suggests that God’s purpose in issuing the genocidal command was to preserve Israel “from lethal spiritual infection by the polytheism of the Canaanites.” Swinburne assures us that “[w]hen monotheism had become more deeply rooted in Israel, such an extreme measure was not, according to the Old Testament, required again.”¹⁰ The extermination program, he says, was “a defensive measure necessary to preserve the identity of the people of Israel” (Swinburne: 2011: 224).

It is unlikely that the extermination of the Canaanites was the means whereby the nation of Israel came into existence, since the scholarly consensus is that it did not in fact take place – at least not in anything like the way or on the scale depicted in the book of Joshua.¹¹ But leaving that point aside, we must ask whether this is a morally acceptable explanation. Swinburne thinks it is. “Even today, and without a divine command,” he says,

many people would think it justified to kill people who had an infectious lethal disease and refused to be kept isolated from the rest of the population. Those who think that an infection which leads to spiritual death is as bad an evil as one which leads to natural death will think that there are reasons (though not of course adequate reasons) for the Israelites to kill the Canaanites even without a divine command (2011: 225).

Swinburne appears to be making a gesture in the direction of general principles that can be applied to the case of the Canaanite genocide. There is, he says, a *prima facie* reason for killing those who might spread “spiritual death” to others. God has the right to act on this *prima facie* reason, and also to command others to act in his place. God saw the threat posed by the Canaanites to the spiritual health of the Israelites, and in order to deal with this threat commanded the latter to annihilate the former. Consequently, the Israelites had, not merely a *prima facie* reason for killing the Canaanites, but a morally *adequate* one.

The obvious worry is that this line of argument may have wider application than Swinburne intends it to have. After all, many persons carrying what he would presumably count as “spiritual infection” are amongst us today. What should be done about that? Should a law be passed silencing evangelical atheists of the Richard Dawkins type, or requiring that they isolate themselves from the rest of the population? If they refused to comply, would there be a *prima facie* reason to kill them? What if someone were to

⁹ See Leviticus 18, which provides a long list of respects in which the Israelites are not to imitate other nations. Child sacrifice is on the list, but most have to do with sexual behavior. Temple prostitution is not mentioned.

¹⁰ Swinburne seems to have forgotten the “ban” against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15), which (in the timeline of the biblical narrative) occurred some four hundred years later during the reign of Israel’s first King. As we shall soon see, the rationale for the Amalekite genocide is quite different.

¹¹ See note 7 above.

announce that God had commanded the assassination of such persons? I presume that Swinburne (like the rest of us) would regard such a person as a dangerous lunatic. But on what principled ground could he make that judgment? (This is an important issue, and I will return to it in the penultimate section of the paper.)

Another question is worth considering briefly. Did the command to exterminate the Canaanites succeed in protecting the ancient Israelites from alien religious practices? According to the biblical record, it did not. The very passage in 1 Kings to which Swinburne appeals for evidence of temple prostitution refers to a period long after the conquest of Canaan. It indicates that, at that later time, the Israelites were availing themselves of the services of cult prostitutes. Indeed, the passage tells us that they “committed all the abominations of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel” (2 Kings 14:24). This is a constant refrain in these biblical narratives, which tell a story of repeated apostasy, a divided kingdom, and exile for the elite of Judah. Given what is actually present in the biblical record, it is hard to believe that commanding genocide was the best, or even a particularly good, way for God to plant the seed of ethical monotheism.

“Have you allowed the women to live?”

Here is a second example. While encamped with the Midianites at Peor, some of the Israelite men had consorted with Midianite women and joined them in the worship of Baal. In response, Yahweh had sent a plague, destroying 24,000 Israelites. Yahweh’s wrath abated somewhat when a young Israelite hero named Phinehas ran his spear through an Israelite man and his Midianite bride – killing them both. At this point in the narrative, Yahweh seems downright pleased.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my jealousy I did not consume the Israelites...” (25:10-11).

Because Phinehas “made atonement for the Israelites,” Yahweh gives him and all his descendants “a covenant of perpetual priesthood” (Deut. 25:13).

However, Yahweh is not yet ready to put this matter behind him. He now commands Moses to “avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites” – to “harass” and “defeat” them (Num. 25:18). Why? “[F]or they have harassed you by the trickery with which they deceived you in the affair of Peor...” (Num. 25:19). Moses obeyed, and his army is said to have killed all the Midianite men. However, they “took the women of Midian and their little ones captive.” Moses gathered his commanders about him, and said to them:

Have you allowed all the women to live? These women here, on Balaam’s advice, made the Israelites act treacherously against the Lord in the affair of Peor, so that the plague came among the congregation of the Lord. Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But all the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves (Num. 31:8-18).

This time, some young virgins are allowed to survive – spared, it would seem, for the enjoyment of Israelite men.¹²

The reason for all this is quite explicit. Once again, the danger of “spiritual infection” by foreign religious practices is the issue. Yahweh was angered by the fact that some young Israelite men had worshiped Baal alongside their new Midianite brides. Not only must the Israelites be punished, but *the Midianites must be punished for causing the Israelites to be punished.*

¹²For a morally sensitive discussion of this particular story that is in many ways complementary to my own, see Fales (2011), 94-98.

Of course, none of this makes the slightest sense. Yahweh blames the Midianites, as if *they* had caused all the trouble, “harassing” the Israelites with their “wiles”. What wiles? To what end? The Midianites could not have been *trying* to harm the Israelites by inviting them to participate in the worship of a god in whom they obviously believed. Nor could they have known that Yahweh would become enraged and send a plague killing 24,000 Israelites. Why, then, does Yahweh tell Moses that the Israelites are to “avenge themselves” against the Midianites? I do not think there is a morally satisfying answer to that question.

I anticipate a minor quibble (Plantinga 2011: 110). Strictly speaking, Yahweh does not command *genocide* in this case. He tells Moses only to “harass” and “defeat” Midian. Blaming the women in particular, slaughtering them and their little boys, and keeping the young virgins alive for the enjoyment of Israelite men seem to have been Moses’ idea. This objection does not come to much, however. Moses is regularly characterized as being very close to Yahweh¹³, faithfully obeying his instructions (except for the notable incident in which he strikes a rock instead of speaking to it¹⁴), and Yahweh expresses no disapproval of anything Moses does in this story. Finally, let us not forget that Yahweh himself is the principal instigator of the attack on Midian.

“Do not spare them.”

In 1 Samuel 15 we encounter another disturbing story, this time from a much later period in Israelite history:

And Samuel said to Saul, “. . . now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I will punish [paqad] the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey’” (1 Sam. 15:1-5).

This text should be read alongside Deuteronomy 25:17-19:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and struck down all who lagged behind you; he did not fear God. Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies on every hand, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget.

In the “timeline” of the biblical narrative, the text in Deuteronomy describes a divine judgment that precedes the command to attack Amalek by many hundreds of years. According to the narrative, Yahweh was already – at that earlier time – determined to have Israel blot out Amalek on account of what it had done to “faint and weary” Israelites who “lagged behind” on their long march up out of Egypt. The implied reason for waiting a while to deal with the Amalekites has nothing to do with *future* Amalekite transgressions. It has instead to do with the urgent need to get the Israelites safely settled in Canaan. Once that has been accomplished, it will be time to *remember* and to *blot out*.

Some readers are reluctant to accept this account of God’s intentions. I can understand their reluctance. Punishing a later generation for the sins of an earlier one is morally repugnant. However, Eleonore Stump thinks that “the story does not have to be read in this way” (2011: 184). It is compatible with the text, she says, that when God “made reckoning” (*paqad*)¹⁵ of what the

¹³ See, for example, Deut. 34:10-12.

¹⁴ Num. 20:2-13.

¹⁵ Stump follows the translation of Robert Alter (1999: 89).

Amalekites had done hundreds of years previously, he also made note of other (to Stump's mind, more relevant) facts. For example, God might have noted that the Amalekites had long been on a very bad trajectory, getting worse and worse as a nation, and God might (correctly) have thought that it was the right time for this particular national identity to disappear (185). Stump does not say that this interpretation is mandatory, but she thinks it is a possible reading of the text.

I don't agree. In the first place, unsupported speculation about what God might possibly have been doing is not sufficient to give us a plausible interpretation of *what the text says* he was doing.¹⁶ In the second place, Stump's speculation fails to do justice to the words of judgment pronounced in Deuteronomy 25:17-19 – words that clearly imply future retribution for what the Amalekites had *already* done at that earlier time. When we put the two texts together, we see that it makes little difference whether the disputed word in 1 Samuel 15:2 (*paqad*) is translated as “punish” (as in the New Revised Standard Version), or as “made reckoning” (as in the translation by Robert Alter that Stump follows). What God is *making reckoning of* is the fact that long ago, the Amalekites had attacked the Israelites from the rear, killing the old and the weak and the infirm. Now, hundreds of years later, it is time for Israel, under the leadership of its first King, to *remember* (another common rendering of *paqad*) and to repay.

That the God of Israel would punish a people for the offenses of its ancestors should come as no surprise. The Mosaic Covenant explicitly states that God will visit (*paqad*) the sins of earlier generations upon later ones (Exod. 20:5),¹⁷ and transgenerational punishment is a commonplace in the Deuteronomistic history. A quite remarkable illustration can be found in 2 Kings. While under the leadership of Josiah, the best and most obedient of Judah's kings, Yahweh decided to destroy Judah because of the crimes of Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh. The problem was *not* with Josiah, or with the behavior of the people of Judah under *his* reign. *Josiah*, we are told, “did what was right in the eyes of the LORD” (2 Kings 22:2). “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him” (2 Kings 23:25).

You might think that Yahweh would at last be satisfied with Judah. He was not. Immediately after Josiah's successful campaign to eliminate wizards and mediums and idolatry, we are told:

Still the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. The Lord said, “I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel...” (2 Kings 23:26-7).

So Josiah comes to a bad end – defeated and killed in a battle against Egyptian invaders, and replaced by a son, who once again “did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 23:37). Manasseh, by contrast, was not punished. He merely “slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the garden of his house” (2 Kings 21:18), after a fifty-five year reign (2 Kings 21:1).

It is clear that the party held responsible by Yahweh is *the Kingdom of Judah*. It is still guilty of the sins committed under the kingship of Manasseh, and *it* still deserves punishment. That is why Josiah must die in battle, all his good and faithful work undone, and Judah too eventually “removed” from Yahweh's

¹⁶ See note 18 below.

¹⁷ The thought in Exodus 20 is not merely that bad behavior has bad consequences for later generations, but that God will impose unpleasant consequences on them because of the sins of the fathers.

sight. The wheels of divine justice may grind slowly, but Manasseh has not been forgotten and Judah has not been forgiven.

Surely, a God who loves justice would never think of punishing later generations for the sins of earlier ones. In 1 Samuel 15, a much more primitive notion of justice is operative – one in which no distinction is made between a nation and an individual, and according to which even “child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” must be destroyed because of offenses that took place hundreds of years previously. The nation of Amalek is still responsible for an attack on Israelite stragglers that took place long ago, and *it* must still be punished for that. What is described in 1 Samuel 15 is on the level of family feuds and revenge killings that stretch across generations.

Reasons for *not* commanding genocide

Thus far, I have focused exclusively on the reasons for commanding genocide given in the texts, arguing that in these sample cases the stated reasons for genocide are bad. But it is also important to see that there are strong reasons for God *not* to do this. One obvious reason is grounded in the dignity and worth of persons. Are not the Canaanites and Midianites and the Amalekites also created in God’s image and after his likeness? Are they not God’s children too? Is this the way a perfect being would deal with children he loves? One would not have thought so. But let us suppose, if only for the sake of argument, that it was morally necessary to eliminate certain national identities. Another severe problem immediately arises. Why would God *use the Israelites* to do the eliminating? Would it not be bad for *them* to slaughter men, women, children, and animals?

It is clear that the people who told these stories had no moral qualms about genocidal warfare. In this important respect, the God of Israel had failed to make her different from other nations. That is bad enough. But in the stories we are concerned with here, God is actually represented as telling the Israelites when and how to practice genocide. Why would he use them in this terrible way? If God thought it was time for this or that nation to disappear, he could have removed that nation “from his sight” without involving anyone else. *Why, then, does he use the Israelites to do this ugly job for him?* I know of no OT text that speaks to this precise issue. But that has not stopped some Christian philosophers from proposing answers. Swinburne, for example, says this:

God surely also had a reason for using the Israelites rather than natural measures such as disease to kill the Canaanites, which was to bring home to the Israelites the enormous importance of worshiping and teaching their children to worship the God who had revealed himself to them, and no other god (Swinburne 2011: 224).

Eleonore Stump makes a similar suggestion. She elaborates a story in which (among other things) God commands the Israelites “to be the agent of the destruction of the Amalekite people to bring home to them in this drastic way the importance of their relationship to God and the importance of God’s judgments, including the divinely ordained practices that distinguish the Israelite people from the surrounding people” (Stump 2011: 190).¹⁸

¹⁸ It is hard to tell how much of this Stump thinks is true. She presents it as part of an elaborate “thought experiment” concerned with a “putatively possible world” in which there is evil and in which “the central claims of Christianity are true.” The question she asks is whether, in such a world, the story of Samuel and the Amalekites could be “literally true” (2011: 182). In order to give an affirmative answer to this question, she feels free to make up details that are not present or implied in the text. On the other hand, it is clear that she thinks of the result of her efforts as a possible interpretation of 1 Samuel 15. Indeed, she repeatedly refers to her various stories as “interpretations” when all she has done is to invent things that are (at best) logically compatible with the text. This way of proceeding is dubious, to say that least. It is one thing to tell a story that is logically consistent with all the sentences in a text, and quite another to provide a possible – i.e., sensible – interpretation of what the text says or implies. Paul Draper is right on the mark when he says that Stump “takes the story literally only in a very impoverished sense...” (Draper 2011: 200-201).

I am not persuaded by this explanation. Even if genocidal warfare had encouraged loyalty to Yahweh, it would have had other, extremely harmful, effects on those who practiced it. Killing women and children and large numbers of animals, would have reinforced the Israelites' brutal approach to warfare, hardening their hearts and making them even less sensitive to the sufferings of others.¹⁹

In response to this worry, Stump writes:

Moral corruption is a matter of making someone morally worse than he otherwise would be...

[O]ne people can certainly be corrupted by going to war to destroy another people it takes to be its enemy. But a lot depends on the condition of the people engaged in the fighting and their reasons for warfare. The Israelite people go to war because of God's command. And ... unending tribal warfare marked by savage practices is the rule in the time when God gives the Israelite people the command to destroy the Amalekites (2011: 191-2).

Stump then proceeds to give a very long list of instances in the biblical narratives in which the Israelites engaged in savage warfare with – or without – a divine command (192).

There seem to be two distinct suggestions here. (i) Since God commanded it, the Israelites had a good reason for killing Amalekites; so they were not corrupted by savage warfare in this case. (ii) Since the Israelites were already engaged in “tribal warfare marked by savage practices,” they weren't made morally *worse* by obedience to the divine command. Neither suggestion is satisfactory. The trouble with the first is that it is hard to see why the presence of a divine command would prevent moral and psychological damage. If you obey a divine command to jump out of a tenth story window, you die. If you obey a divine command to kill all the children in a neighborhood school, you suffer a different kind of damage. In neither case are you protected by the mere fact that “God commanded it,” thereby giving you a “good reason” for doing it.²⁰

What are we to make of Stump's second suggestion? Were the Israelites already so deeply corrupted by the savage practices of their time that they couldn't have been made *worse* by killing Amalekite children? I doubt it, but even if this were so, it would raise another difficult question. Why would God command a savage and violent people to do *more of the same*? Should he not be working to make them *better* in this important respect?

According to Stump, however, God *is* trying to make them better. He is gradually forming them into “a people who can be united with God” (195). Strangely, God's plan for doing this is (at this stage) to have them execute divine “judgment” on another nation, killing women and children in *God's* name and for *God's* sake. Predictably enough – as Stump herself acknowledges – there is no progress.

... [V]ery shortly after the events of this story, the Israelite people is itself immersed in all the practices God has condemned on the part of the Amalekite people and all the surrounding peoples with whom God also commands the Israelite people to fight (193).

But Stump is undeterred. She suggests that temporary failures can contribute to long-term success – that they can help form “a people who can be united with God” (195).²¹ They do this by showing them “what will not work to cure them of what needs to be healed in them” (194). Sometimes, Stump explains, “learning what won't work” is “an essential preliminary in the process of the discovery of what will work and of the willingness to accept it” (194-5). “In the miserable process of formation through experience,”

¹⁹ For a brief but insightful discussion of the “psychological damage” to those who engage in this kind of warfare, see Paul Draper (2011: 201).

²⁰ I don't mean to deny that God could miraculously have prevented harm to the Israelites. I claim only that this logical possibility contributes nothing to a sensible interpretation of 1 Samuel 15.

²¹ Stump assures us that in the world of her “thought experiment,” God has a separate plan for the “formation” of the Amalekite people – one in which their suffering at the hands of the Israelites “has a role to play in the relationship of this people to God, during the time of their existence as a people” (2011: 194-5). I believe that Stump is implying that being slaughtered by the Israelites was somehow good for the Amalekites.

she explains, “one of the things a people can learn is what will not work to enable a people to become just, good, and loving” (197).

So what exactly is it that Israel is supposed to learn “will not work?” Stump gives us a broad hint by framing her discussion of 1 Samuel 15 with references to Benjamin Netanyahu. Her title is taken from an interview with one of Netanyahu’s advisers. When asked how seriously the Prime Minister took the threat from Iran, the adviser replied: *Think Amalek!*²² In the final sentence of her paper Stump suggests that her way of thinking about the story of Samuel and the Amalekites “would be helpful” for the Israeli Prime Minister (197). How so? As nearly as one can tell, Stump thinks that reflecting on her interpretation of 1 Samuel 15 might dispose Netanyahu to break the cycle of violence and make peace with his neighbors. The message to Israel – and to us – is that violence will not bring a people (or an individual) into a right relation to God.

At last, then, Stump thinks she has found a possible reason for the command to exterminate the Amalekites – a reason that she believes to be compatible with our shared intuition that genocide is a moral outrage. It comes down to this: *Israel needed to practice extreme violence in order to learn that such violence will not make it a “good and just and loving” people fit for union with God.*

Although Stump does not claim to have shown that any of this is true, she does seem to think *it could be true* and that it offers an “interpretation”²³ of 1 Samuel 15 that has two significant advantages. It allows us to say that this difficult text gives the sober (and literal) truth about what God commanded, and it enables us to do so without giving up “deeply entrenched moral intuitions” (196).

Stump’s “interpretation” of 1 Samuel 15 is puzzling on more than one level. It is hard to believe that killing children was needed to get the Israelites to see that killing children is wrong. But even if it is assumed that Israel did need to learn the lesson of non-violence from the bitter experience of practicing violence, we must still ask: why did God *command* extreme violence? It’s not as if the Israelites were particularly reluctant to engage in it. As Stump herself says, they were already quite accustomed to waging savage warfare on other peoples (192).

Finally, and most importantly, it is difficult to take seriously the idea that God commanded the extermination of Amalekite children in order to show Israel that extreme violence would not bring her closer to God. If this is God’s teaching method, it is unsurprising that so many nations (and individuals) have yet to learn the desired lesson.

It’s time to take stock. I have suggested that there are very strong reasons for God *not* to command genocide. The reasons explicitly given in the relevant OT texts are very bad. The reasons proposed by Swinburne and Stump for using the Israelites to do this nasty job are extremely implausible. Commanding the Israelites to engage in wholesale slaughter would have been one of the worst things God could have done for their moral and spiritual development. If, then, it is assumed that God exists and is all that he is said to be – perfect in knowledge and wisdom and goodness – must one not conclude that there are very grave errors in the OT record?

²² See Jeffrey Goldberg (2009). Goldberg explains:

“Amalek,” in essence, is Hebrew for “existential threat.” Tradition holds that the Amalekites are the undying enemy of the Jews. They appear in Deuteronomy, attacking the rear columns of the Israelites on their escape from Egypt. The rabbis teach that successive generations of Jews have been forced to confront the Amalekites: Nebuchadnezzar, the Crusaders, Torquemada, Hitler and Stalin are all manifestations of Amalek’s malevolent spirit. If Iran’s nuclear program is, metaphorically, Amalek’s arsenal, then an Israeli prime minister is bound by Jewish history to seek its destruction, regardless of what his allies think.

²³ See note 18, where I express my reservations about Stump’s use of this word.

The Limits of *Human Knowledge*

Before drawing this conclusion, however, we must confront the objections of those who seek to avoid it by appealing to mystery and stressing the limits of human knowledge. God, they say, is utterly transcendent and his reasons are often beyond our ken. “His ways are not our ways; his thoughts are not our thoughts.” He is the Holy One, and we should not expect to be able to make human-sized sense of all that he does. In scripture, God has told us what we need to know, but he has not answered every question we might like to ask, and it is presumptuous for any human being to pass judgment on God’s behavior or on his commands. In the case in hand, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that God has not seen fit to tell us *all* his reasons for commanding genocide, and it is entirely unsurprising that we are unable fully to understand why God chose to use the Israelites in this strange and surprising way.²⁴

I think it must be conceded that an omnipotent, omniscient God would be likely to have plans and purposes that are beyond our ken. But as I have been at pains to point out, at least *some* of the supposed reasons for commanding genocide are explicitly stated in the relevant OT texts. *Those* reasons are only too humanly comprehensible and they are unworthy of a perfect being. The problem is not merely that I do not see how they could be good reasons. It is rather that I see quite clearly that they are *bad* reasons. For those who share this view, the suggestion that there might have been other, better reasons for commanding genocide does not rebut the charge that there are grave errors in the Old Testament. If *any* of the reasons attributed to God are bad, then either the text is mistaken in attributing them to God, or God is not a perfect being.

Skeptical theism to the rescue?

I anticipate the following response. The reasons for divinely mandated genocide given in the OT may look bad only because we do not see the whole picture, only because we do not – and perhaps cannot – know enough to appreciate how wonderfully good God’s plan *in its entirety* truly is. For all we know, then, the stated reasons for commanding genocide are *not* bad, *all things considered*.

Let’s step back, then, and give this suggestion careful consideration. It will be useful to take into account the work of contemporary “skeptical theists” – theists who, in response to the evidential problem of evil, cast doubt on our ability to have justified beliefs about what an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God would be likely to do when all relevant factors are taken into consideration. Can skeptical theism be pressed into service by those who wish to deny that there are grave errors in the Bible?²⁵

In order to get a handle on this question, I will be making use of Michael Bergmann’s lucid presentation of skeptical theism (Bergmann 2009). According to Bergmann, there are several relevant areas in which our knowledge may be deficient. The class of possible goods and evils may contain many of which we are unaware. The class of entailment relations between possible goods and the permission of various evils may contain many of which we are unaware. Finally, we may often be incapable of knowing the total moral value or disvalue of very complex states of affairs.

It’s not that we know nothing at all. We can be certain (as I am sure Bergmann would agree) that sin and suffering are bad, that love and friendship are good, and so on; to a limited degree, we can also see what evils are necessary to bring about greater goods or to prevent worse evils. But the fact remains that for human beings the realm of possibly good (or bad) states of affairs and their entailments may be largely unknown, and we have no reason to think that what we do know of it is *representative* of the whole.

²⁴ Alvin Plantinga backs up this idea with an appeal to core Christian doctrines: “So we are perplexed by those OT passages: did God really command something like genocide? But then we recall the love revealed in the incarnation and atonement, and we see that whatever God did, he must indeed have had a good reason, even if we can’t see what the reason is” (Plantinga 2011: 112-13).

God, on the other hand, must be acquainted with *all* the relevant facts. So while it might be right for me to pass a harsh judgment on the man who willingly lets a toddler drown in a shallow pond (what morally acceptable reason could *he* have for allowing such a thing?), it would not be right to pass the same judgment on God. We may devoutly wish that God would heal a friend or a loved one dying of cancer, and we may even pray for a miracle. But when God does not come through, we lack proper grounds on which to judge that God *should* have done what we asked. There may – for all we know – be morally relevant values and disvalues and entailments such that even omnipotence cannot achieve sufficiently worthy ends without allowing bad things to happen to nice people (or even to nice fawns trapped in forest fires). As far as we can tell, then, God might perfectly well be justified in permitting such things.

Can we apply this general line of thought to the problem posed by the divinely mandated genocides reported in the Bible? Can we use it to show that the reasons for the genocidal commands in the OT narratives may, for all we know, not be bad reasons, after all? Before considering this possibility in more detail, it should be noted – and emphasized – that there is a striking and important difference between the challenge to classical theism posed by the alleged genocide commands and that posed by other sorts of evil. A well-informed theist has the option of denying that God ever commanded genocide, whereas she does *not* have the option of denying that God has allowed very many terrible evils.

If, for example, a theist is asked *why God permitted the Holocaust*, she cannot sensibly reply that the Holocaust simply did not occur. The evidence of its occurrence is abundant and overwhelming. Holocaust deniers are both deeply irrational and morally offensive. If the God of classical theism exists, he *must* have permitted the Holocaust (and Holocaust-denial), and he *must* have had a morally sufficient reason for doing so. If it turns out to be implausible to say that God had a morally sufficient reason for allowing such things, then so much the worse for classical theism. The situation is quite different in the case of the alleged divine commands to exterminate the Canaanites and the Amalekites. The evidence that God commanded this is *not* abundant and overwhelming. It consists merely in a number of sentences in ancient texts regarded by many as (in some sense or other) divinely inspired. It is *not* true that if God exists and is omnipotent and omniscient, he *must* have commanded these things.

Theists who believe that God is perfectly good are *not* therefore obliged to defend the view that God had morally sufficient reasons for commanding genocide. There is another alternative – that of simply denying that God did anything of the sort. Unlike Holocaust denial, doubting the accuracy of the biblical texts in these matters is neither obviously irrational nor morally offensive. So even if the retreat into skeptical theism remains an option, it is not the only one – or even, I would argue, the most attractive one.

It is true, of course, that if a Christian denies that God commanded genocide, she faces a new challenge. Why, it may be asked, would God permit grave moral errors to creep into a collection of books revered by so many people? This is a serious issue, but skeptical theists are poorly positioned to press this particular objection. *For all a skeptical theist knows*, God may have had very good but unknown reasons for allowing serious errors to creep into the canon – reasons that are beyond our ken.

Nevertheless, a Christian who is unable or unwilling to entertain the possibility of serious errors in any part of the Bible may think that skeptical theism is just what is needed to deal with the genocide texts. How might the story go? Well, maybe (for all we know) the Canaanites and the Midianites and the Amalekites were worse than we can possibly imagine. If left unchecked, they might perhaps have significantly reduced the total value God could realize in the course of world history. Without the genocidal commands, perhaps there would have been no nation of Israel at all, salvation history would have come to an abrupt halt, and God would have had no recourse but to give up on the human experiment once and for

²⁵ For a very brief presentation of one possible skeptical theist solution, see the Introduction to Bergmann, Murray, and Rea (2011),

all. Perhaps just the right number of Canaanites and Amalekites were obliterated in order to make it possible for Israel to survive long enough as a nation to allow God's master plan to succeed. For a theist who is skeptical enough, any or all of these things might be true.

If that seems too daring, the skeptical theist may try to get away with saying even less. She may make her point much more abstractly, without the slightest gesture in the direction of a possible story about what might (for all we know) have justified God in commanding genocide. Bergmann's account of skeptical theism provides some of the principles and conceptual machinery required for approaching the problem in this way. As he presents it, skeptical theism includes four distinct theses, the fourth of which is:

(ST4) We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have (Bergmann 2009: 379).

Building on (ST4), the following defense might be deployed against my argument. "You claim that the stated reasons for the genocidal commands were bad," the skeptical theist may now say, "but this is not the sort of thing we can properly be said to know, or even to have any good reason to believe. It is no doubt true that *we perceive* a lot of disvalue in the divinely mandated genocides, and that we continue to do so even when the divine purposes as revealed in the OT are taken into account. But who are we to say that these *perceived* disvalues *accurately reflect* their *total* value or disvalue? Who are we to say that the apparent failure of God's commands to achieve all the purposes for the sake of which he is said to have issued them is not explained by something known to God alone? Since we may as easily as not be ignorant of total value or disvalue and value-entailments, we are not in a position to say whether more or less value overall was realized because God commanded genocide for the reasons recorded in the OT. Even if we cannot come up with a good 'story' about how they might be good and morally sufficient, that has no tendency to show that they are not."

What should we say to this? Some people reject skeptical theism on the ground that it undermines moral deliberation and moral agency by making it impossible for us to have reasonable beliefs about what *we* should do. I won't go that far. However, I do think that when it is applied to the problem posed by the genocide stories in the Bible, skeptical theism requires a degree of skepticism about what God might do that would – and should – be unacceptable to most Christians. If something like (ST4) is all that is needed to fend off moral objections to the genocide texts, then we have no reason to think that God will not *again* command wholesale slaughter and no good reason to adopt such a dismissive attitude toward *new* reports of horrific divine commands.

Indulge me for a moment by entertaining the following fancy. The first part of my story is true. I quote from a press report, dated April 8, 2008:

More than 400 children have been rescued from a polygamist sect on a remote Texas ranch amid allegations of forced marriage and sexual abuse. The children, mostly girls wearing pioneer-era dresses, were removed from the Yearning for Zion ranch yesterday in what authorities described as the largest child-welfare operation in Texas history... (Times Online 2008).

Now for the fictitious part:

The Governor of Texas told reporters today that after praying for divine guidance, he received the following command. "Thus says the LORD. The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints must be completely wiped out. Make no agreements with these people. Show no mercy.

Kill them all, so that everyone will know that polygamy and forced marriage and child abuse are abominations in my sight.”²⁶

What do you think the people of Texas would do with such a Governor? What *should* they do? I take the answer to be patently obvious. Everyone would, and should, recognize that he had lost his mind. Steps would be taken. It would be deemed *far* more reasonable to think that the Governor was deluded than to think that God had issued such a command.

But now enter a skeptical theist of a rather unusual sort – one who knows the Governor well and has long had great confidence in his ability to discern God’s will. “To be sure, this plan doesn’t look like a wise one to us,” she might say. “But God knows more than we do. Maybe these deviant Mormons are far more dangerous than we can see; maybe killing them is a good way to teach the rest of us just how much God cares about monogamy and how much he loathes forced marriages. I don’t know that this is so, but I also don’t know that it isn’t so. The bottom line is that God knows the total value or disvalue to be realized by killing those fundamentalist Mormons, and we don’t. We had best trust the Governor on this one.”

This is patently absurd, and I am sure that no actual skeptical theist would take such a line. Like everyone else, skeptical theists would say that it is far more likely that the Governor is deluded than that God had issued such a command. But then it seems to me that *we should treat OT reports of divinely mandated genocides in the same way*.

I anticipate the following objection. But the OT is part of *the Bible*, and the Bible is God’s Holy Word. It has a kind and a degree of authority that this imaginary Governor could not possibly have. I reply: if there is to be a relevant difference between the two cases, it must come in the form of a *solid argument* for thinking that, unlike my imaginary Governor’s “word from the LORD,” the genocide texts in the OT are completely trustworthy. I have yet to see an argument for this conclusion that is anywhere near as compelling as the thought that a God who is morally perfect would be *extremely unlikely* to command genocide.

It may help to think about matters this way. Divine communications are not generally thought to have ended with the closing of the canon. Christians in particular pray for divine guidance and they often receive what they take to be answers. As in the case of any other doxastic practice, there are recognized ways of forming beliefs about what God wants and recognized classes of defeaters for those beliefs. One obvious class of defeaters concerns *the moral character of the content of the beliefs that are the outputs of the practice*. As Richard Swinburne himself puts it, “the prophet who commends cheating and child torture can be dismissed straight away (Swinburne 1992: 86). I should think so. William Alston – who did as much as anyone to defend the epistemic credentials of religious experience – once wrote that if he reported that God wanted him to kill all phenomenologists, Christians would take this as a sure sign that his experience was non-veridical (Alston 1982: 6). Indeed.

Can we imagine defeaters for these defeaters? Something that would convince us that God had, after all, commanded cheating or child torture or the extermination of all phenomenologists? No doubt an inventive philosopher could come up with a story. But to remove the grotesque implausibility of such claims about what God wants from us, a fanciful story is not enough. Nor is it sufficient to observe that God knows far more than we about the total value/disvalue of such things.

Are things relevantly different when we turn our attention to divinely mandated genocides in the Bible? I cannot see how. When a book in the canon says that God commanded something we would otherwise regard as a heinous crime, we should treat the content of the purported command as a defeater for

²⁶ I owe the inspiration for (though not the details of) this example to Evan Fales (2011: 96).

the claim that God was the author of that command. And we should expect *far* more by way of a defeater for this defeater than the familiar refrain, “but God knows ever so much more than we.”

Concluding remarks

I have argued that the genocide texts should be rejected on moral grounds. But some will say that the price of rejection is too high. Eleonore Stump speaks for many when she says that it would require “the rejection of the entire idea of divine revelation in these texts.” She continues:

If one text purporting to be part of a divine revelation is to be rejected because it strikes us as incompatible with our moral intuitions, then other texts alleged to be divinely revealed will also need to be examined to see if they should be rejected for similar reasons. And now our moral intuitions are the standard by which the texts are judged. In that case, the texts can’t function as divine revelation is meant to function, as a standard by which human beings can measure and correct human understanding, human standards, and human behavior (2011: 181).²⁷

One might have thought that it would be dangerous to use a text like 1 Samuel 15 to correct our moral principles. However, Stump assures us that she does *not* mean to say “that we should rethink our moral standards and be prepared to take genocide and the wholesale slaughter of animals as morally acceptable for the sake of preserving traditional Jewish and Christian views about revelation” (181). Indeed, as we saw earlier, she labors mightily to come up with an “interpretation” that will allow us to accept the letter of the text without forcing us to give up “deeply entrenched moral intuitions” (196). Ironically, it would appear that even for Stump bedrock moral intuitions are in the driver’s seat when it comes to deciding how to “interpret” a text that challenges them. One is left to wonder why she thinks it is so much worse to “reject” a text because it conflicts with deep moral intuitions than it is to “interpret” it in an unnatural way to avoid a conflict with those same moral intuitions.

I do think Stump is right about one thing. If one disquieting text is judged to be morally deficient, others will have to be handled in the same way.²⁸ Does this give Jews and Christians a strong reason to believe that God issued the command reported in 1 Samuel 15? I don’t think so. The dilemma Stump poses is as false as it is familiar. Either, she says, we use the Bible as a standard by which we can “measure and correct” our moral views, or we use our moral intuitions as a standard by which the Bible is to be judged. I fail to see why the “correcting” cannot run in both directions. Sometimes, reflecting on a particular passage may bring us up short and help us to see something new. At other times, our moral intuitions (themselves partly formed by reflecting on Scripture) may give us good reason for making a negative ethical judgment about a particular text. As we struggle with the texts, we may learn from them; but we may also have to pass judgment on them.

There are, after all, many competing voices within the Bible itself. As Eryl Davies points out, “the biblical authors themselves frequently exercise a critical role, questioning past beliefs and querying past judgments” (2005: 221). Davies cites the Chronicler, who, “in recounting the treatment of defeated captives (2 Chron. 28:8-15), highlights God’s displeasure with the folly and cruelty of war and commends the merciful clothing and feeding of the prisoners” (222).

²⁷ In the next paragraph, Stump also rejects the possibility of interpreting the text in such a way that it “says something very different from its obvious literal meaning.”

... [T]he cost of this sort of move is not much different from rejecting the story outright as true, and it has the same effect. Human standards and understanding judge the texts; they decide which texts can be taken literally and which have to be taken allegorically. Consequently, the texts do not supply a standard by which human affairs and human views can be corrected (181).

²⁸ For examples of other rebarbative texts, see Curley (2011).

It is not difficult to find other examples. Ezekiel 18 tells us that children are no longer punished for the sins of the fathers (if they ever were).²⁹ The book of Job rejects the view – present in Proverbs and Psalms³⁰ – that the righteous are systematically rewarded and the wicked systematically punished. The book of Jonah is often taken to be written in opposition to the narrow exclusionary policies of Ezra/Nehemiah.³¹ It is not difficult to read Amos and Isaiah as rejecting cultic sacrifice as prescribed in the Pentateuch.³² Some of my examples are controversial.³³ But however we adjudicate particular interpretive issues, the list of inner-biblical challenges will be a long one. If, then, we engage in ethical criticism of the genocide texts, we are continuing a process begun by the biblical authors themselves.³⁴

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²⁹ Strictly speaking, the prophet announces a new moral economy without explicitly disputing the validity the earlier one. This is even more obvious in Jeremiah’s version of this oracle (Jer. 31:29-30). Bernard Levinson speculates that Ezekiel’s “indirection” may be intentional, since “explicit rejection of transgenerational punishment” would involve repudiation of “an authoritative teaching” that is present in the Decalogue itself (Levinson 2008: 62). Whether or not this is correct, we can see that transgenerational punishment is morally problematic, and we can see dramatic moral progress in Ezekiel 18.

³⁰ See, for example, Prov. 11:5-6 and Ps. 1.

³¹ See Crenshaw (1993): 380.

³² See Amos 5:1-27 and Isa. 1:10-20. See also Ps. 51:16-17.

³³ For example, Christopher Begg thinks the passages cited in note 32 are best read as “hyperbolic reminders of the truth that cultic sacrifice is pleasing to God only when offered by one whose whole life is lived in accordance with God’s will” (Begg 1993: 667).

³⁴ I wish to express my appreciation to Justin McBrayer, Ed Curley, and Evan Fales for reading and commenting on drafts of this paper. I am especially grateful to the referees of this journal for incisive criticisms and suggestions for improvements. Without their prodding, this paper would have ended up in the trash.

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