

DID GOD REALLY COMMAND GENOCIDE?

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE JUSTICE OF GOD

Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan



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Introduction

THE NEW ATHEISM AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

The world's leading atheist, Oxford University's Richard Dawkins, has engaged in a good deal of name-calling. The object of his scorn? Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."¹

Now, it has long been known that Dawkins and other "New Atheists" use rhetorical smokescreens and "village atheist" tactics—marked by aggressiveness, intolerance, and sophomoric argumentation—not endorsed by other atheists in the academy, and Dawkins has admitted that his own theory of atheism is contradicted by the realities of everyday life.²

And despite well-informed, credible attempts to correct Dawkins's definition of "faith," he brazenly continues to define it as belief *immune* to all evidence and inquiry—a characterization no Christian theologian worthy of the name would accept. And even though modern science was established by Bible-believing theists, Dawkins perpetuates the myth that "faith" is opposed to "science."

Loads of scholars have responded to the caricatures, rhetoric, and sometimes downright silliness of the New Atheists.³ In fact, the philosopher of science Michael Ruse, an atheist himself, declares that Dawkins's *God Delusion* book "makes me embarrassed to be an atheist."⁴

That said, what about Dawkins's claim that the God of the Old Testament is *genocidal* and a *bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser*? Is he correct when he calls Joshua's destruction of Jericho an example of Israel's "ethnic cleansing" in which "bloodthirsty massacres" were carried out with "xenophobic relish"? Are these events "morally indistinguishable from Hitler's invasion of Poland" or "Saddam Hussein's massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs"?⁵

Here, a number of people, including Christians, think that Dawkins may have a point. After all, Christians typically accept that the Bible, being the Word of God, is trustworthy in all it affirms. In particular, they insist on its authority for faith and morals. Yet a perennial challenge to such a stance is a series of jarring passages in the Old Testament using language such as "leave alive nothing that breathes," "utterly destroy," and "no survivor was left." This appears to teach that God has commanded genocide, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "the deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or national group."⁶ But surely genocide, and the divine command to "utterly destroy" (NASB) is morally wrong. It would seem, therefore, that the Bible teaches serious moral error.

The Current Discussion in Philosophy and Biblical Studies

If you read contemporary philosophical critiques of theism, theological ethics, and the moral argument for God's existence, you will eventually encounter biblical references in which God purportedly commands genocide. In a debate on God's existence with Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, atheist philosopher Michael Tooley states that "although I am an atheist, I should very much like it to be the case that I am mistaken in that God, as I have defined him, exists."⁷ However, "the God of Roman Catholicism or Protestant Fundamentalism, or of Islam I would not welcome, for it would mean that the world, while not the worst imaginable, would be very bad indeed." One reason he gives for this conclusion is "Yahweh's command to Saul to kill all the Amalekites,"⁸ and he cites 1 Samuel 15:3: "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."

Similarly, in his book *Morality without God*, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong opens a chapter on divine commands and ethics (see discussion in chaps. 11–14 of this book) with a citation of Joshua 10:40: "So Joshua defeated the whole land, . . . he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded him."⁹ Another atheist philosopher, Louise Antony, wonders what people would say if God commanded genocide

today “as he does in 1 Samuel 15:1–3.”¹⁰ Such comments are reflective of the rising tide of atheists—including the New Atheists—who are writing books and articles using biblical proof texts in an attempt to show that the biblical God commands genocide.

In 2009, the philosophy of religion journal *Philosophia Christi* devoted an entire issue to the question “Did God Mandate Genocide?”¹¹ The same year the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame hosted a conference on ethical questions raised by the Abrahamic God in the Hebrew Scriptures,¹² where skeptics and believers alike debated whether some of Yahweh’s commands were morally justifiable; the skeptics claimed that God commanded the killing of Canaanite noncombatants as a genocide. The Society of Biblical Literature in 2009 and 2010 hosted panel sessions on such issues. And we are seeing scholars devoting increased attention to these topics with book titles such as *God Behaving Badly, Is God a Moral Monster?*, *Holy War in the Bible*, *The God I Don’t Understand*, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, *The Violence of Scripture*, *Seriously Dangerous Religion*, and the like.¹³ Clearly this classic question of violence in Scripture is an issue that is not going away.

Contents of the Book

Because of the enduring nature of this topic, our book is dedicated to discussing and responding to the question of whether God really commanded genocide. We examine what we take to be the critic’s strongest arguments and address those concerns by offering a coherent and wide-ranging response—biblically, theologically, philosophically, ethically, and legally. And in light of our previous work in this area and discussions about this topic, we examine related topics that inevitably emerge in open forums, online discussions, and personal conversations.¹⁴

Though most of the book will be readily accessible, there are a few places involving more technically difficult philosophical discussion about the nature of divine-human authorship of Scripture as well as divine commands. We have provided extensive summaries at the end of each chapter that will assist the uninitiated reader in navigating through these portions. And since we provide a summary of the key points at the end of each chapter, we’ll only briefly review the book’s contents here.

The book is broken up into four parts. Part 1 (“Genocide Texts and the Problem of Scriptural Authority”) addresses what the problem actually is and how critics typically formulate their arguments against the God of the Bible, who commands killing Canaanites—which seems to give Bible believers

precedent for engaging in similar acts of aggression (chap. 1). In light of a God who reveals his will and sometimes issues harsh commands, we address the topic of what it means to say that the Bible is the Word of God and that both God and humans are its authors (chap. 2). Another matter related to biblical authority concerns the matchup between the characteristics of God in the Old Testament and God as described in the New, looking at the work of Old Testament scholars Eric Seibert and Peter Enns in particular (chap. 3).

In part 2 (“Occasional Commands, Hyperbolic Texts, and Genocidal Massacres”), we address the matter of occasional—or particular, uniquely issued—commands. In chapter 4, we discuss the question, does the Bible actually command *us* to kill innocent people? We move from there to the matter of whether the Canaanites could be described as “innocent” (chap. 5).

Then we move to questions of how to understand the commands to “utterly destroy” and “leave alive nothing that breathes.” We see these commands as hyperbolic (using exaggerated language), which is evident both in ancient Near Eastern war texts and when comparing biblical texts with each other. For example, the Bible uses the language of “driving out” and “dispossessing” the Canaanites, and the Bible does not claim that God commanded the virtual extermination of everyone in Canaan—that is, genocide. And where we are told of the “utter destruction” of Canaanites or other groups, the Bible indicates that they continue to exist in large numbers (chaps. 6 through 8).

We move from there to address critics’ objections to interpreting the relevant biblical texts hyperbolically (chap. 9). In chapter 10, we respond to the *legal* objection that even displacement of a people is technically genocide. We look at legal precedent of recent international law/human rights cases—particularly the horrors of the former Yugoslavia—to show that the “genocide” charge is misguided. Additionally, this chapter examines certain theological objections to the hyperbolic interpretation—slippery slopes, false analogies, and the like.

Part 3 (“Is It Always Wrong to Kill Innocent People?”) takes us into the realm of theology, ethics, and philosophy. We present a basic understanding of what is called “divine command theory”—that human obligations are grounded in and constituted by the commands of a good, just God who may issue occasional difficult commands (e.g., to kill Canaanites) to achieve a greater good. Unfortunately, many critics treat divine commands as arbitrary and utterly unconnected to the good, wise character of the God who issues them. For example, they reveal their mistaken understanding of divine command theory by raising such nonsensical questions as, “What if God commanded something intrinsically evil?” This is like asking, “What would it be like if square circles existed?” We discuss these and other such objections in chapters 12 and 13.

Plato's Euthyphro objection is commonly raised in the context of divine commands. Are God's commands—and thus, our duties—merely *arbitrary*? That is, could God simply command us to do the opposite of what he does? Or is the very concept of goodness *empty*? If what God commands is our duty, then this means that God has no moral obligations. So how can God be good if he has no moral obligations? We respond to an array of Euthyphro-related questions as they have a bearing on divine commands to kill human beings (chaps. 13 and 14).

While some claim that God could never command killing that involves noncombatants, a wide range of ethical systems recognize that this is not absolute. A case of supreme emergency may override generally binding moral principles—for example, deceiving Nazis to save Jewish lives. Those who assume that our confidence in the trustworthiness of difficult divine commands in Scripture must always be overridden by generally accepted moral principles are making some questionable assumptions; we argue that the grounds the biblical theist has for thinking a good, wise God issued these unique commands are *stronger* than the grounds for thinking that killing the innocent is always wrong. In chapters 15 and 16, we explore these and other challenges about difficult divine commands—including moral intuitions about bludgeoning babies, the morally corrupting effects of killing, rationalizing genocide, and the like.

Chapter 17 further engages biblical texts on commands to kill Canaanites, Midianites, and Amalekites, responding to various philosophical criticisms along the way. We argue that the biblical theist has adequate grounds for thinking that God, on these unique occasions, issued such an exemption to the general rule against killing. Then in the next two chapters, we address the question of why we *shouldn't* believe some claimant today (say, a fictitious Texas governor) who insists that God “told” him to “utterly destroy” some criminal sect in his state—and also the matter of why we *should* believe that God truly commanded Moses and Joshua to kill Canaanites. In chapter 18, we look at criteria for prophetic authenticity, and in chapter 19, we expound on the place of abundant miraculous validation as the backdrop for these difficult commands.

In part 4 (“Religion and Violence”), we look at topics that typically emerge in the context of warfare in the Old Testament. In chapter 20, we explore the question, does religion cause violence? Then in chapter 21, we compare Old Testament warfare and Islamic jihad, which are often lumped together while ignoring important distinctions. The next chapter briefly examines the myth that the text of Joshua inspired the Crusades—as well as other myths related to the Crusades. And finally, we look at questions related to Jesus's words about “resisting evil” and “turning the other cheek,” as well as issues

concerning pacifism and just war. We see the Old Testament Yahweh wars as unique events in salvation history and not a model for modern warfare. We recognize that Christians disagree on just war–pacifism questions, but we find a just war position morally justifiable and less problematic than pacifism.

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PART 1

GENOCIDE TEXTS
AND THE PROBLEM OF
SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY

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1

The Problem Clarified

AN ATHEISTIC PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT

In this chapter, we'll look at the argument of the philosopher Raymond Bradley, who does as good a job as any critic on this topic.¹ He asserts that a “logical quandary” arises for any theist who believes that the Bible is “a reliable guide to what we should and should not do.”² To show this, he lays out an argument, which assumes the following moral principle, which we'll call the *Crucial Moral Principle*:

*It is morally wrong to deliberately and mercilessly slaughter men, women, and children who are innocent of any serious wrongdoing.*³

To negatively illustrate this principle, Bradley cites a series of Old Testament passages to “show” God apparently does issue commands to kill innocent women and children. He refers to the book of Joshua here:

Consider the case in which God commands Joshua to slaughter virtually every inhabitant of the land of Canaan. The story commences in chapter 6 of the book of Joshua, telling how the hero and his army conquer the ancient city of Jericho where they “utterly destroyed everything in the city, both man and woman, young and old.” Then, in chapters 7 through 12, it treats us to a chilling chronicle of the thirty-one kingdoms, and all the cities therein, that fell victim to Joshua's, and God's, genocidal policies. Time and again we read the phrases

“he utterly destroyed every person who was in it,” “he left no survivor,” and “there was no one left who breathed.”⁴

What, then, is the quandary for the Bible-believing theist? Bradley asserts that this theist cannot, without contradiction, believe all four of the following affirmations:

- 1 Any act that God commands us to perform is morally permissible.
- 2 The Bible reveals to us many of the acts that God commands us to perform.
- 3 It is morally impermissible for anyone to commit acts that violate the Crucial Moral Principle.
- 4 The Bible tells us that God commands us to perform acts that violate the Crucial Moral Principle.⁵

Bradley states that the Crucial Moral Principle is universal and exceptionless: it holds true “for all persons, places, and times.”⁶ By “God,” Bradley means a “robust supernatural being”⁷ who is “omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.”⁸ And the Bible “reveals to us many of the acts that God commands us to perform.”⁹ Of course, here Bradley is assuming that the Bible *accurately* records these commands. Some scholars would argue that the Bible *inaccurately* records God’s acts or commands; therefore the affirmation, “The Bible inaccurately records God’s acts or commands,” could then be compatible with 1, 3, and 4.

However, Bradley makes it clear that he has a robust view of biblical authority in mind. He assumes that “the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the revealed Word of God.”¹⁰ Bradley cites Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga for support: “Scripture is inerrant: the Lord makes no mistakes; what he proposes for our belief is what we ought to believe.”¹¹ Bradley cites these as typifying the view he tries to criticize—a position he refers to as *biblical theism*. This suggests that the argument should be rephrased as follows:

- 1 Any act that God commands us to perform is morally permissible.
- 2 God is the author of the Bible.
- 3 It is morally impermissible for anyone to commit acts that violate the Crucial Moral Principle.
- 4 The author of the Bible commands us to perform acts that violate the Crucial Moral Principle.

Bradley points out that all four of these statements, taken together, are inconsistent. The biblical theist, however, is committed to 1 and 2—that what God,

the author of the Bible, commands us is morally permissible and that God is the author of the Bible. So the biblical theist must reject *either* 3 (that it is morally wrong to violate the Crucial Moral Principle [slaughtering innocent people]) *or* 4 (that the Bible's author commands us to violate that Crucial Moral Principle). However, Bradley argues that the biblical theist can't reject 3 or 4 without being inconsistent. To do so is either to deny what the Bible clearly says or to endorse moral absurdities. We will argue against Bradley's claim in this book. In fact, we argue that the biblical theist can defensibly reject *both* 3 and 4—that it is always morally impermissible to mercilessly slaughter innocent people and that the divine author of Scripture commands us to do this.

Initial Clarifications: Human and Divine Authors of Scripture

Before proceeding to assess Bradley's argument, an important ambiguity needs to be ironed out from 2—which affirms that God is the author of the Bible. Traditional Christian teaching, however, accepts that the Bible has multiple authors. Each book of the Bible has a human author; the Pauline Epistles, for example, are attributed to Paul or an amanuensis (secretary) writing on his behalf. Jews have traditionally accepted that Moses in some sense authored (or perhaps, to some degree, edited) the first five books of the Old Testament and that David wrote some of the Psalms.

At the same time, biblical theists accept that the primary author of Scripture is God (or 2). Bradley refers to Plantinga as a prime example of a biblical theist. Plantinga himself affirms that “an assumption of the enterprise [of traditional biblical commentary] is that the principal author of the Bible—the entire Bible—is God himself (according to Calvin, God the Holy Spirit). Of course each of the books of the Bible has a human author or authors as well; still, the principal author is God.”¹²

This, however, leads to an immediate issue with premise 4—namely, “The author of the Bible commands us to perform acts that violate the Crucial Moral Principle”: does Bradley mean the *human* author(s) of the books in question, or the *divine* author?

Initially, one might contend that the answer is obvious. Bradley is an atheist. So he obviously cannot mean that the divine author of Scripture commands us to kill innocent people since there is, in his view, no such divine author at all. But this response would be much too quick. Bradley's argument is what philosophers call a *reductio ad absurdum* of biblical theism—an argument that attempts to reduce, in this case, biblical theism to absurdity. Though he

is not a biblical theist, he assumes this stance “for the sake of argument” to show that obvious absurdities or contradictions flow from accepting this position. Bradley argues that biblical theists *must* accept all four of the statements above—1, 2, 3, and 4—but that they *cannot* accept them without logical contradiction. So a “logical quandary arises” for any *theist* who believes that the Bible is “a reliable guide to what we should and should not do.”¹³

A problem surfaces: if we assume that the *human author* of Scripture commands us to perform acts that violate the Crucial Moral Principle, then this undermines Bradley’s argument. Let’s rework things to show how this is so:

- 1 Any act that God commands us to perform is morally permissible.
- 2 God is the (*primary*) author of the Bible.
- 3 It is morally impermissible for anyone to commit acts that violate the Crucial Moral Principle.
- 4 The *secondary* human author of the Bible commands us to perform acts that violate the Crucial Moral Principle.

Notice that these four truth claims (propositions) are consistent and don’t involve any contradiction whatsoever. To get a contradiction, we have to add a further premise: *God’s role as primary author entails that whatever the secondary human author of the Bible affirms or commands, God likewise affirms or commands*. But this argument therefore must assume a particular understanding of the relationship between divine and human authors of Scripture so that whatever the human author says or affirms is identical with what God says or affirms.

But this understanding of the relationship between divine and human authors is implausible. It would be silly to say that whatever the human author says or affirms is identical to what God says or affirms. Consider this affirmation by Paul: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1 NRSV). Even if God is the primary author of Scripture, God is not saying his name is Paul or that God is an apostle. Or in David’s famous psalm of repentance, he says, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict” (Ps. 51:4). Surely this psalm is not affirming that God is a sinner! While these human authors of Scripture affirm, respectively, the status of being an apostle and a sinner, God is obviously not affirming this.

Equally important, this relationship between divine and human authors is rejected by many biblical theists—including Plantinga, whom Bradley cites as a paradigmatic example of a biblical theist. As we saw above, Plantinga understands scriptural inerrancy as based on the fact that *God* makes no

mistakes, and what the divine author, God, “proposes for our belief” with the text is what we “ought to believe.”

Plantinga clarifies his position (in a different article in the same issue of the journal we cited above, where he replies to Ernan McMullin):

I think *he* thinks what is decisive here is what the *human author(s)* of the text in question had in mind. If that *is* what he means, I am obliged to disagree with him. In order to understand Scripture, we must know who its author and audience is [*sic*]. As to the latter, it is the Christian church over the ages; as to the former, as Aquinas and Calvin agree, the principle and primary author of Scripture is the Lord. (Of course this doesn't imply any kind of crude dictation theory.) What we really need to know, therefore, is what *he* intends to teach in the text in question. This may very well be what the human author had in mind in writing that text; but of course it needn't be. It might be that the Lord proposes to teach us (coming where we do in the whole history of his interactions with his children) something that hadn't occurred to the person or persons actually composing the text in question. I would concur with those Christians, for example, who see various Old Testament passages (Isaiah and elsewhere) as really referring to Christ, the second person of the Trinity, and making assertions about him; it is unlikely, however, that the original author intended to make assertions about the second person of the Trinity. What the original authors had in mind will ordinarily be of importance, but it will not necessarily settle the issue as to how to understand the text in question.¹⁴

Later in his book *Warranted Christian Belief* (published in 2000), Plantinga revisits this topic. There he distinguishes two different types of scriptural scholarship. The first is *historical biblical criticism*, which sets aside “theological assumptions or presuppositions”;¹⁵ this approach attempts to discern what “the human author” of a given book or passage intended to assert.¹⁶ The second is *traditional biblical commentary*; this approach assumes that “the principal author of the Bible is God” and seeks to understand “what it is that the Lord intends to teach in that passage.”¹⁷

Likewise, the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig, who takes a similar view, offers further clarification. He also rejects the *dictation* theory of biblical inspiration—the view that God dictated the Bible to human authors, who simply wrote it down word-for-word. Craig argues: “There are also elements in Scripture that express the emotions and anxieties and the depression of the human authors, and it seems implausible to attribute those to God's dictation. These seem rather to be genuine human emotions that are being expressed.”¹⁸ An example he gives are the so-called imprecatory (or prayer-curse) psalms. Psalm 137 is a psalm written while in exile in Babylon: “By the

rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs” (vv. 1–2). The psalm ends with a startling statement: “Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks” (vv. 8–9). Craig argues that this runs contrary to what Jesus said about loving our enemies, concluding that it is “hard to think of this as something that is dictated by God rather than a genuine expression of the Psalmist’s anger and indignation of those who opposed God.”¹⁹

Craig not only rejects a dictation theory of biblical inspiration, but he thinks that what humans affirm is not necessarily what God affirms. That is, God *allows* human authors of Scripture to express unrestrained emotion, even though God, the divine author, would not approve.²⁰ Such a psalm reminds us about honestly expressing our emotions, such as rage or despair, in our prayers about where we should look for justice. And while psalmists may utilize hyperbole and strong speech in the midst of their white-hot rage, they are expressing the very biblical desire for justice to be done—that God repay people according to their deeds, as the martyrs do in Revelation 6:9–10.²¹ However the believer approaches such psalms, Craig’s approach nicely illustrates how God’s being the author of the Bible does not mean he endorses everything that the human author expresses.

We have laid out a standard philosophical argument against the biblical God and author of Scripture, who allegedly commands genocide and thus violates the “inviolable” Crucial Moral Principle. To help clarify Bradley’s argument, we have also differentiated between divine and human authors in order to avoid some implausible—indeed nonsensical—conclusions.

Summary

- The Crucial Moral Principle affirms that deliberately taking innocent human life is always and everywhere morally wrong.
- And, the argument (by Raymond Bradley) goes, God, the author of Scripture, commands people—even us today—to perform such acts.
- The Bible’s authors are both divine and human, though God is the primary author.
- However, it would be silly to say that whatever the human author says or affirms is identical to what God says or affirms (e.g., human emotions expressed in the Psalms, “Paul, a servant of God . . .”).
- Human biblical authors were not God’s typewriters nor were their words being dictated by God.