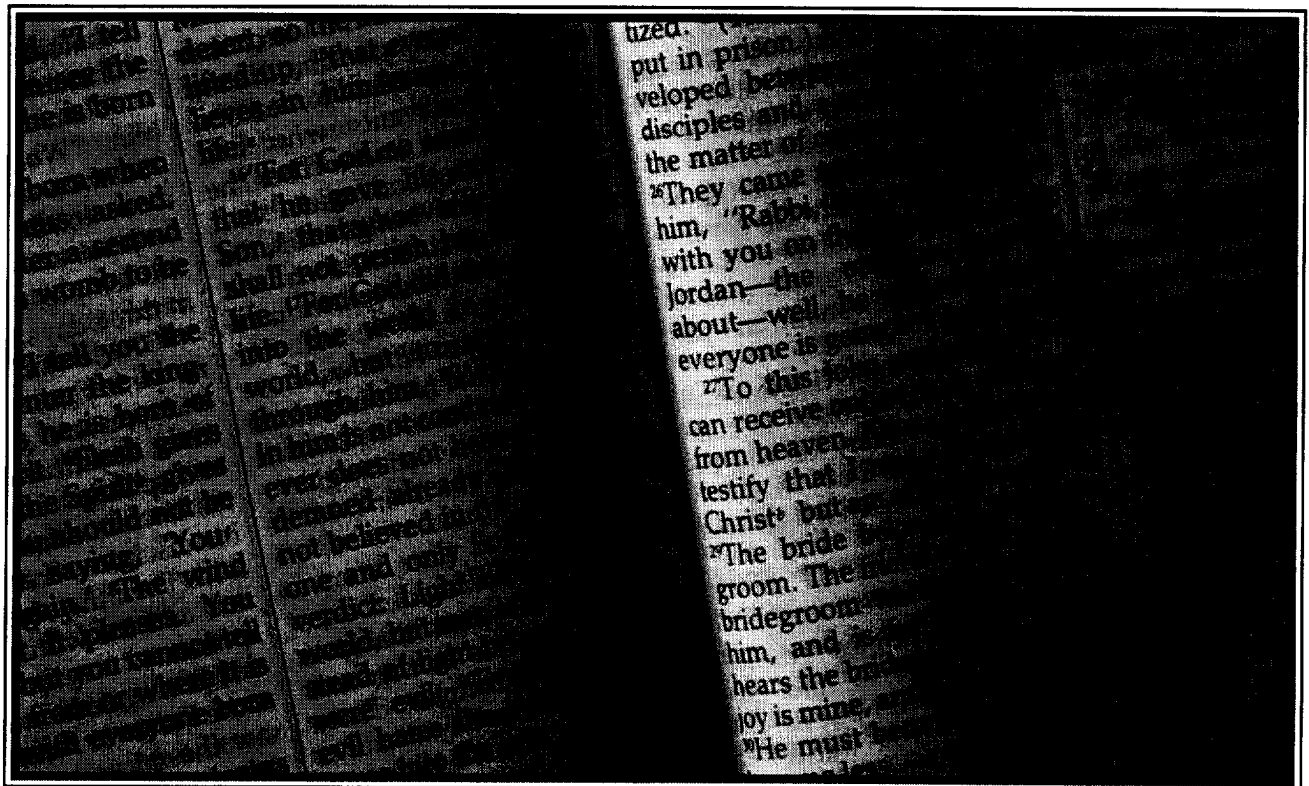


The Inspiration of the Hebrew Bible and the Morality of God's Commands



Peter van Inwagen

It is often argued that the doctrine that the Hebrew Bible is the inspired word of God is logically and morally untenable. The following argument is typical of the arguments that have been offered in support of this conclusion:

In many places in the Hebrew Bible, God is represented as commanding human beings to perform acts that are morally wrong. If the Hebrew Bible is the inspired word of God, it cannot be grossly mistaken about what God has commanded human beings to do. Therefore, if the Hebrew Bible is the inspired word of God, God has on many occasions commanded human beings to perform morally wrong acts. But God is a morally perfect being and would never do what is wrong (the Bible itself testifies to this in Genesis 18:25, among others: “Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is right?”), and a command to another to do what is wrong is itself a wrong act; thus, The Hebrew Bible is not the inspired word of God.

represented as commanding things that are indisputably morally wrong (genocide, for example.)

The Bible is, throughout, and in every passage, the inspired Word of God – of a God who is an omniscient and morally perfect being.

I cannot attempt to present a full and adequate discussion of what I mean by the words I have used to state the second proposition. But I will say, at the least, that it entails the following proposition:

God wants there to be such a thing as the Bible – that is, a set of writings that play the role that the Hebrew and Greek scriptures have played in the history of Israel and the Church; and the wording of the various books of the Bible is (more or less) the way God wants it to be.

A more exact statement of what I propose to do in these remarks is this: I will attempt to reconcile the first

The concrete humanity of the authors of the various books of the Hebrew Bible is on striking display in every page – to a much greater extent than the humanity of, say, Aristotle or Spinoza or Kant is displayed in the pages of their books.

Those who offer arguments like this one generally regard them as unanswerable. I think they can be answered, however. Here I offer one sort of answer. (No doubt there are others.) My remarks will take the form of an attempt to reconcile two propositions, both of which I accept:

At many places in the Hebrew Bible, God is

proposition with the proposition I have said the second entails. (And that very imperfectly – I cannot say nearly enough to do this adequately in these brief remarks.) My attempt at reconciliation is just that: mine. I speak for no other Christian, much less for any Jew. My intention is not to give a theologically correct account of the nature of biblical inspiration – for the simple reason that it has not been given

to me to know what the true nature of biblical inspiration is. What I shall do is to tell a story about God and the Bible that I contend is a true story for all anyone knows – given that there is a personal God who acts in history – a story according to which both propositions are true. (Put differently, I propose to do something analogous to what students of the argument from evil call “presenting a defense.”)

The core of my “defense” is this one indisputable fact: Whether the Bible is a merely human text or not (whether God played some important role in its composition or not), it is certainly a human text. Every single word of it was written by human beings, each of whom was, like every human being who has ever lived, a product of a certain time and a certain culture. (The concrete humanity of the authors of the various

God, a story told from many points of view. According to Exodus, God said to Moses: “Behold, I make a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been wrought in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord; for it is a terrible thing that I will do with you” (34:10, RSV).

The Old Testament – that is, the Old Covenant – as Christians call the Hebrew Bible, is the story of the “terrible thing” God did with the Jews. It is a story of a long and painful process of straightening the crooked timber of humanity – a process that never produced (and was never intended to produce) “perfectly straight” people, but which produced a people who began to be straight enough to be aware of how crooked they still were (and perhaps more aware than was

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books of the Hebrew Bible is on striking display in every page – to a much greater extent than the humanity of, say, Aristotle or Spinoza or Kant is displayed in the pages of their books.) And these times and cultures varied, and the world-views that they imposed on the authors of the various books of the Bible varied with them.

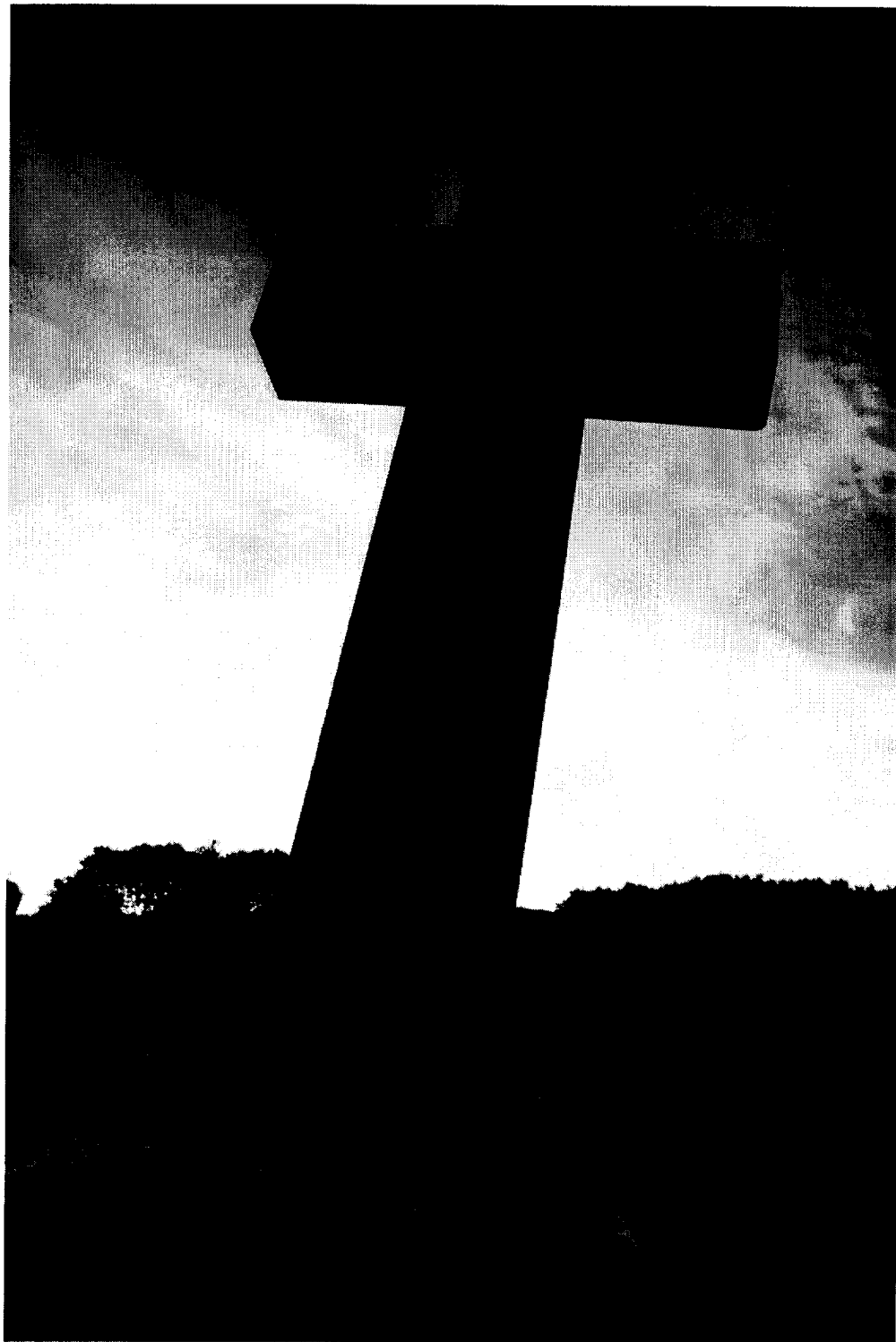
The Latin singular *biblia* (“the Bible”) is, of course, an adaptation of the Greek plural *ta biblia* (“the books”). Leaving aside the later Christian additions to (what Christians regard as) the canon, we may speak of this collection of books – in Belloc’s words, “[t]hat great mass of Jewish folklore, poetry and traditional popular history and proverbial wisdom which we call the Old Testament” – as the Jews’ own story of the Covenant which (they believed) they had entered into with

entirely good for them of how much more crooked than they “the Nations” were). One part of that straightening was a training in a new morality. (And not simply the proclamation of a new morality. It’s easy to say, “Now, children, I want you all to share.” Getting the children to share is a more demanding task.)

Critics of the morality of the God of the Hebrew Bible rarely ask themselves what the source of the morality from whose perspective they present their criticism is. A few years ago, I watched with great pleasure the HBO production called *Rome*. The final disk of the DVD version of *Rome* includes interviews with some of the people involved in the production of the program. In one interview, someone or other was asked in what ways he thought the Romans were like us and unlike

us. He replied that they were remarkably like us in most ways, but that they differed from us significantly in their extreme brutality – in both their willingness to commit brutal acts and in their indifference to the pervasive, entrenched brutality of their world. When he was asked whether he could explain why we and the Romans were so different in this respect, he did not quite answer by saying “Christianity is what made the difference” – I don’t think he could have brought himself to say that – but he did identify “Judeo-Christian morality” as the source of the difference. And that was a very good answer. The morality of almost everyone in Western Europe and the Anglophone countries today (if that person is not a criminal or a sociopath) is either the morality that the Hebrew Bible was tending toward or some revised, edited version of that morality. Almost every atheist (in Western Europe and the Anglophone countries), however committed he or she may be to atheism, accepts some modified version of what Judeo-Christian morality teaches about how human beings ought to treat other human beings. And even the modifications are generally achieved by using one part of that morality to attack some other part (for example, by attempting to turn the injunction “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” against Judeo-Christian sexual morality).

The morality to which critics of the moral character of the God of the Bible appeal is a gift to the world from Israel and the Church and is by no means self-evident. I don’t think that many missionaries have heard anything resembling the following from those whom they were attempting to convert: “Hey – it says here, ‘But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth.... [T]hou shalt utterly destroy them.’ That’s awful. How can you expect us to worship such a God?” And the reason they haven’t heard that is that most people in most times and at most places would see nothing but good sense in that command. Most people have taken it for granted that a tribe, when it moves into new territory, will kill those of



the previous inhabitants that it does not enslave. That’s what people do – the Old Common Morality says – and they’d be crazy to do otherwise. And the authors of Deuteronomy saw nothing wrong with that policy, either. Whether they lived during the reign of King Josiah or during the Exile, whether they were editing and expanding older written material with Mosaic roots or composing the book with no sources but oral tradition (and their own political interests), they didn’t hesitate to represent God as commanding what we call genocide

because they were typical human beings, and typical human beings see nothing wrong with genocide. After all, that's what the authors of Deuteronomy would have commanded if they had been God.

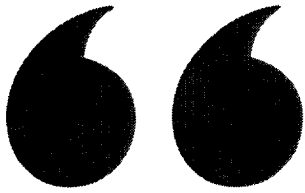
The Hebrew Bible, the multi-perspectival history of the Covenant, is, as I have said, a human document, or a little library of human documents. It is, among other things, the story of a people being trained in a new and unobvious morality. It is a history of a gradual straightening of crooked timber under the hand of a master joiner. It presents readers of the Bible with "snapshots" of people at various stages in the straightening process. That's the kind of history it is, and it's that kind of history because that's the kind of history God wanted it to be.

"But then how can we turn to the Bible for moral guidance?" Well, if you turn to the Bible for moral guidance, you mustn't treat it as an essay intended to present a system of morals, as a book like the Nicomachean Ethics or Spinoza's Ethic or The Critique of Practical Reason. Aristotle and Spinoza and Kant could influence the thoughts and beliefs of their readers only by saying things, only by putting forward propositions and arguments for those readers to consider.

God (who is in one sense the author of the Bible) is under no such limitation. He can reach into you and touch your heart and guide your thoughts. And – the Church's promise is – he will do this when you read the Bible. He will be present within you and will guide you through its pages, highlighting this passage, awakening your critical capacities when you read that one, creating in your mind a sense that "this passage is not addressed to my condition" when you read a third. He will, moreover, guide you to passages he particularly wants you to read: *Tolle lege*. And, if you encounter difficulties in the text, he will lead you to people – the Doctors of the Church or your Aunt Alice – who will help you to resolve them.

All this is true provided you are willing to be transformed by submitting yourself to the will of God. If you come to the Bible with preconceived moral notions (say, that slavery is morally permissible) looking for "proof texts," you will fail to get moral truth out of it, but you will almost certainly do yourself positive moral harm. But if you have submitted yourself to God's will and if you read – say – that God has commanded that the children be punished for the sins of the fathers, your reaction will be along these lines: "Yes, that's what seemed self-evidently true to the Hebrews once, that it





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was right to punish the children for the sins of the fathers, and that that was therefore what God would have told their ancestors to do; with God's help, we now know better. And their descendants came to know better. This was the mindset that God was leading the Hebrews out of. This is what – with God's help – the author of Ezekiel knew that the authors of the Pentateuch did not know.”

“Well, why didn't God just tell the Hebrews that it was wrong to behave in certain ways? – that genocide, for example, was just wrong, or that it's not morally acceptable to punish someone for what his ancestors have done? Why didn't God, instead of guiding them to a new and better morality, just tell them at the outset what that 'better' morality was?” Well, perhaps he did – and perhaps he didn't. I don't know. I

wasn't there. And neither were the authors of Deuteronomy and Joshua (I mean the writers responsible for the final wording of those books). But think about the question using this model. You are a school teacher who is renowned for

having taught the large, strong children in your class not to bully the small, weak ones. Did you begin by telling the large, strong ones not to bully the small, weak ones – or by asking them how they'd like to be the victims of bullying? Maybe you did and maybe you didn't. But if you did, it didn't do much good, not by itself. If you did, your saying things to them was only a very small part of your success in getting them to stop their bullying.

“But if God is a morally perfect being, why did he create human beings in such a way that one of their cultures could


be made a little better than the (appalling) moral norm only by being subjected to centuries of painful moral training?” That’s not our topic. That’s the problem of evil, or one strand of it. Here I will remark only that the question rests on a false presupposition, one that is analogous to the false presupposition of the question, “If the Athenians were such wonderful architects, why did they make the Parthenon without any roof?”

“Why has God presented the story of the Covenant from many incompatible points of view – including points of view that incorporate horrible (if typically human) moral error? Why didn’t he produce a nice coherent history, and one that represents a morally correct point of view throughout?” I confess I don’t know. But I can guess, and I think that my guess is true – or an important part of the truth – for all anyone knows. Since I’m presenting only a “defense,” a guess that is right for all anyone knows is as good for my purposes as the (no doubt) unknowable truth.

The Bible has been a remarkably effective document – as believing Jews and Christians judge effectiveness. As Professor Dawkins might say, the Bible – or the set of religious practices grounded in the belief that that document is the Word of God

– has been a very efficient “meme,” a meme that – history demonstrates – is very good at persisting through historical time and spreading itself about in geographical space. That’s something that missionaries know. The Bible has not been translated into more languages than any other book only because missionary societies believe it to be the inspired word of God; another important part of the explanation of this fact is that missionaries know from experience that the Bible is one of their most effective tools. They know that those to whom they preach “take to it” with very little prompting or preparation. They know that it captures their attention. They know that people of most cultures will listen to the words of the cloud of witnesses who speak to them across the millennia from its pages. And quite possibly – who is in a position to deny this? – a version of, or a replacement for, the Bible that a secular reader of our culture would find more appealing (or less appalling) than the actual Bible would have little meaning for the peoples of most times and most cultures.

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