

Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea, eds.

Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham.

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Here are some ingredients to produce a solid, thought-provoking, and interesting book:

- employ a provocative, fascinating title, and theme (*Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*);
- include original essays from a range of well-respected philosophers and biblical scholars advocating a range of theistic and atheistic views (including those from Edwin Curley, Eleonore Stump, Richard Swinburne, and Nicholas Wolterstorff);
- add responses to such essays from other established scholars (including Paul Draper, Alvin Plantinga, and Peter van Inwagen) along with counter-responses;
- bracket the collection of essays with an illuminating introductory essay (by Michael Bergmann, Michael Murray, and Michael Rea) that sets the scene, focus, and background; and conclude the book with an essay (here from Howard Weinstein) that does not recapitulate what was already read but outlines and promotes a perspective that complements and challenges the earlier chapters.

Divine Evil? includes such ingredients in abundance and makes for a reading feast of contemplation, challenges, and at times, frustration. Lest the final descriptor in the previous sentence be read as a negative, let me be clear: the book confronts a penultimate theme within an ultimate theme, bearing upon not only the existence of God but upon the question to what kind of God one is referring. It questions whether the biblical God, and so the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (and therefore also the God of Jesus of Nazareth, and thus for Christians, also Jesus Himself) was complicit in, openly advocated, and approved of evil (even if through silence).

The book's scope and thus limitation, is of the biblical God of the Hebrew Bible (with the proper explanations for why that term in an inter-religious context can be as unsatisfying as Old Testament or Tanach). For Jews and Christians in particular, such a deity inhabits, sacralizes, steers, and imbibes the biblical space, landscape, and trajectory—even while voices within and beyond those traditions claim such a God (may) also desecrate, dominate, and deflower it.

Are the genocidal romping and decrees said to be advocated by God in Deuteronomy or Leviticus or Samuel texts of terror that need to be highlighted and repudiated, or are they esoteric or mystical texts imbued with a deep moral and allegorical meaning? (Note that I have no time here even to pretend that a literal

reading—without moral rebuking—is ethically plausible). Is the ultimate price too high if one cedes to disowning such texts? If so, what transpires of one's faith and theology if such texts are maintained without censure? Is it a case of choosing between the Bible and belief in God or is such a choice nonsensical for the traditional Jew or Christian in light of orthodox views of the revelatory tincture and essence of the Bible? Is so much at stake within any biblical passage that it must be upheld or justified in order for the whole edifice to be sustained?

As noted, *Divine Evil?* includes the voices of theists and atheists, the former usually seeking to support the validity of the revelatory character of the entire Bible, faithfully employing a range of creative and scholarly approaches; the latter seemingly baffled by why such an argument is even occurring, reading violent and genocidal texts with horror and embarrassment. In 'Does God Love Us?' Louise Antony turns to an analysis of the fall in Genesis (along with Job and the Akedah)—and a parallel children's story of *Heckedy Pig*—to maintain (à la David Blumenthal, though not cited) that God is abusive, a 'terrible parent' (30). There are moments of stimulating, close readings. Her respondent Eleonore Stump, however, is unimpressed, but rightly highlights the dynamic and rich traditions of biblical scholarship, especially drawing upon Talmudic gems and the work of Robert Alter (50). Antony then interestingly queries why 'a benevolent God "reveal(s)" himself in so obscure a way that one needs a Ph.D. to understand him' (56).

In 'The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob', Curley acknowledges his role in representing those who 'reject the God of the Bible' (58). While his interpretation of the Bible often remains too literal-minded and static, his approach is a fairly balanced and open reading and a vast improvement on the theological chicanery of a Dawkins or Hitchens. Yet, his question: 'Is God a sadistic bastard?' (67) may go too far for some. Ultimately, Curley concludes that: 'we ought to dismiss the claim of Exodus 21 to report accurately the kind of action God is apt to permit his creatures to do' (62). For Curley, if one still wants to maintain any notion of a morally good God, then passages like Exodus 21, which advocate some form of human slavery, cannot be deemed a reliable source of, from, or about God. In van Inwagen's somewhat tepid response, he contends that any limits in the original ethical injunctions were due to the culture and general moral sensibilities of the people of that time. He also challenges one to submit to the will of God even as the Bible of that God is replete with morally ambiguous and unsatisfying claims ascribed to that God. Sharing my thoughts, Curley remarked: 'I have, however, had some problems understanding precisely what [van Inwagen's] reply is' (85).

In Evan Fales's 'Satanic Verses: Moral Chaos in Holy Writ' Fales turns to John Locke's analysis of revelation to contend that only a turn to voluntaristic divine command theory can save the passages from the Bible that seem morally incoherent if not immoral. Ultimately, he prefers to 'think the heavens vast and void' than to know such a God (108). Beautifully and powerfully written, Evan's chapter is another instance, where to this theologian, an atheistic view trumps the theistic one. Here, the theist is Plantinga, whose discussion of what he subtitles 'Old Testament "Horror"' and his use of scare quotes should frighten away any hope of encountering a careful, empathetic, and just presentation of the victims of the violence attributed to God. Plantinga unhelpfully labels

Moses' and Samuel's advocating of killing children as 'excessive' (110) and unfortunately asks: '[H]ow bad is it to die earlier rather than later?' (111). Such insensitive comments contribute to the death knell of philosophy of religion when it is confronted with atrocity and useless affliction.

In 'Animal Sacrifices', John Hare challenges the sacrificial, Temple-based system that entailed the deaths of thousands of animals for so-called atonement (and links such a system with Christ's death as a sacrifice for the sins of others) thus minimizing human responsibility and accountability. While the scope and theme of the essay on its own does not sufficiently complement the other essays in the book, the critique by James L. Crenshaw is a highlight and shows why the response and counter-response formula can be so successful.

A similar case can be made for Mark C. Murphy's 'God Beyond Justice', in which he tirelessly—and tiresomely—turns to legalistic and obtuse phrasings to try to justify why it is not possible for God to wrong the Jericohtes of Joshua 6:16-21, while not gainsaying the historical possibility for such accounts within the text. Luckily, we have another atheistic critique (from Wes Morriston) that brings a greater sense of honesty and reality to the biblical reading, refusing to flee the scene of the massacre at Jericho too quickly for the sake of abstract legalistic, semantic, and philosophical arguments.

Further abstract presentations plague Stump's chapter, in which she concocts a thought experiment to evaluate the story of Saul, Samuel and the Amalekites in the context of a 'putatively possible world' (182). The main chapter is again saved by the respondent, in this case, a cutting critique by Paul Draper (especially in his coining of the term 'Eleonorean Christianity' (198) which accentuates the inadequacy and provincial scope of such an experiment).

Morriston again shines in his response to Richard Swinburne's paper ('What does the Old Testament Mean?'). While Swinburne helpfully illustrates how some patristic theologians interpreted passages like Psalm 137:8—that speaks of the heads of Babylonian children smashed against rocks—the turn to a defense of God is hasty, and therefore seemingly indifferent to the suffering that is wrought in the name of God. As Morriston concludes: 'Given the extreme difficulty of twisting these morally problematic texts into something digestible, and the moral peril of worshipping God as they represent him, it would be better simply to say, "No, God did not do these things; no, these parts of the Bible are mistaken"' (231).

In the meticulous 'Reading Joshua', Wolterstorff contends that phrases that speak of the Israelites' great violence against the people of Canaan may be a literary trope. He also, however, concedes that 'The Book of Joshua is dangerous literature' that can easily be manipulated, and has been manipulated, to serve injustice and the oppression of the other' (256). Antony's critique rightly challenges the value of supporting any hyperbolic religious statements that celebrate violence against another. In 'What about the Canaanites?', Gary A. Anderson seeks to justify why it is morally unproblematic for the

Israelites to conquer the people of Canaan. Like his *Sin: A History*, it is well written and demands close reading, as does the response and reply with Wolterstorff. Such close reading is also demanded of the final set of dialogical encounters between Christopher Seitz's 'Canon and Conquest' and Evan Fales. In his 'Reply to Fales', Seitz notes that 'for a volume in which many of the authors were philosophers, I was surprised at the level of emotion' (316). Of course, one shouldn't be—at least, not with respect to a topic that centers on the possibility of divine evil and that also thus presupposes, at some level, a divine being. If there is no God, there is no divine evil. But if there is divine evil, 'woe to us' (1 Sam 4:8).

In my own *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology*, I examine the words and experiences of victims and perpetrators of mass atrocities to test the viability (and pastoral applicability) of theological and philosophical statements about God and theology in light of mass atrocities. The verdict, as one might hope, is ambiguous. There are compelling reasons for some to disavow faith in God and for others to maintain faith, even if in the form of protest theology or the arguing with God tradition as emblematic of a key strand in Judaism. While I am a Catholic theologian, I sided predominantly with the atheistic strands of *Divine Evil?*, having little sympathy for any approach aligned with skeptical theism (which claims we can't know definitively of God and so cannot make judgments about God), or with divine command theory, or with any approach that turns a biblical passage into an idol. Wait: can idolatry possibly include an explanation of how one reveres the Bible, which for Jews and Christians, is the Word of God, an inspired text, revelation? Perhaps, especially if biblical passages mired in genocide, slavery, patriarchal dominance, holy war, and (in the New Testament) supersessionism, trump love of God as embodied in care for one another.

To conclude and to respond to some of the issues raised in this volume, here are a few of my own aphorisms to digest: better to denounce parts of the Bible to serve God than seek to save the God of the Bible in a Pyrrhic victory; better to expurgate the texts of terror than the Amalekites who are called to be exterminated; better to highlight the gap between God and humanity by identifying biblical passages ingrained by human frailty and sin than seek to justify these passages while sullying the image of God through humanity's frailty and sin; better, at least in many of the above cases, to listen to the atheist's questioning and doubting words than the pious, faithful platitudes of the theist.

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