

## “Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive”

### On the Problem of Divinely Commanded Genocide

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*They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant women nor women in childbed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house. They laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two or could cut off his head or spill out his entrails with a single stroke of the pike. They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them headfirst against the crags or snatched them by the arms and threw them into the rivers, roaring with laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water, "Boil there, you offspring of the devil!"*

Las Casas, "The Devastation of the Indies"

With these heartbreaking words, Bartolomé de Las Casas chronicled the conquistadors' genocide of the inhabitants of the West Indies. Surprisingly, mainstream historians have paid this horrifying list of evils little heed. It is not that they have typically denied that a genocide occurred, but rather that they have shown little interest in or revulsion to it. Howard Zinn illustrates this tendency through Samuel Eliot Morison's classic *Christopher Columbus, Mariner*. Though Morison never denies Columbus' atrocities,

he mentions the truth quickly and goes on to other things more important to him. Outright lying or quiet omission takes the risk of discovery which, when made, might arouse the reader to rebel against the writer. To state the facts, however, and then to bury them in a mass of

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ABSTRACT: In this essay I argue that God did not command the Canaanite genocide. I begin by critiquing Paul Copan's defense of Canaanite genocide. Next, I develop four counterarguments. First, we know intuitively that it is always wrong to bludgeon babies. Second, even if killing babies were morally praiseworthy, the soul-destroying effect these actions would have on the perpetrators would constitute a moral atrocity. Third, I develop an undercutting defeater to the claim that Yahweh commanded genocide. Finally, I argue that we ought to repudiate divinely commanded genocide given the justification this provides for ongoing moral atrocities.

other information is to say to the reader with a certain infectious calm: yes, mass murder took place, but it's not that important—it should weigh very little in our final judgments; it should affect very little of what we do in the world.<sup>1</sup>

Christians have often treated the Old Testament like Morison treated Columbus. That is, they acknowledge the violent acts of Yahweh and the Israelites, but they do so with “a certain infectious calm,” as if the stories did not offend our deepest moral sensibilities. Not surprisingly, such behavior from “family values” Christians strikes the new atheists as positively perverse, and they have not shied away from making their incredulity known. Richard Dawkins makes the point with his famous subtlety and characteristic restraint: “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.”<sup>2</sup> And Daniel Dennett observes, “Part of what makes Jehovah such a fascinating participant in stories of the Old Testament is His kinglike jealousy and pride, and his great appetite for praise and sacrifices.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, Christopher Hitchens complains “of what the [Ten] commandments do *not* say. Is it too modern to notice that there is nothing about the protection of children from cruelty, nothing about rape, nothing about slavery, and nothing about genocide? Or is it too exactly ‘in context’ to notice that some of these very offenses are about to be positively recommended?”<sup>4</sup> Whatever one thinks of the new atheists, surely they have a point: how does one explain these horrors?

Although there are many problem passages in scripture, those relating to genocide are surely among the most distressing. It seems to me that the Christian who reflects honestly on the picture of God as revealed in scripture must face the tension between God's moral perfection and the divine command for genocide. The dilemma begins with the following beliefs:

- (1) God is the most perfect being there could be.
- (2) Yahweh is God.
- (3) Yahweh ordered people to commit genocide.

Next, as I will argue at some length below, properly functioning, moral adults have another powerful intuition that

1. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States 1492–Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 8.

2. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 51.

3. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 265.

4. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 100.

(4) Genocide is always a moral atrocity.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, it seems very plausible to accept

(5) A perfect being would not order people to commit a moral atrocity.

As the new atheists would have it, we ought to conclude from this that there is no perfect being. The Christian however could instead reason in the following direction:

(6) Therefore, a perfect being would not order people to commit genocide. (4, 5)

(7) Therefore, Yahweh did not order people to commit genocide. (1, 2, 6)

Unfortunately (7) brings us into direct contradiction with (3), and so we must choose which proposition to reject. One could defend (3) by arguing that (1) or (2) is false. While rejecting (1) may appeal to some process theists, without an explanation of why God commanded genocide, he ends up looking not merely less than perfect, but as a moral monster. Rejecting (2) may find approval with Marcion but it is obviously unacceptable for a Christian. Next, a Christian could reject (3) in favor of (7), but this raises new questions about biblical inspiration.<sup>6</sup> As such, most evangelicals will insist that God is perfect, that Yahweh is God, and that Yahweh ordered the Canaanite genocide, despite the fact that they have no idea *how* a perfect God could command genocide.

Paul Copan purports to offer a way out of the dilemma in his evocatively titled essay “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?”<sup>7</sup> In the paper Copan critiques the new atheists, challenging their treatment of biblical violence as uncharitable, misleading, and consistently demonstrating a dull insensitivity to historical and narrative contexts. On the specific issue of genocide, Copan’s pivotal defense of (3) is rooted in a denial of (4): genocide is not always a moral atrocity.

In this paper I will critique Copan’s position by providing rational and prudential arguments in defense of (4) from which it follows that if Yahweh is God then Yahweh did not command the Canaanite genocide. The paper will be divided into two sections. In the first section I will critique four arguments Copan develops to justify Yahweh’s genocide. Then in the second part I will develop four counterarguments: the first two will seek to defend (4) while the latter two will focus on undermining our ground to believe (3). The first three

5. While genocide might be justified in the possible worlds with wholly malevolent societies or races of beings, there is no evidence for such a wholly malevolent society or race in the actual world: thus (4) is true.

6. Consider John Mansford Prior: “In *Joshua* the genocide is ordered by God. The only reading that makes sense to me is that divinely sanctioned violence is a misguided manipulation of religion irreconcilable with faith in the Abba of Joshua the Nazarene” (“‘Power’ and ‘the Other’ in *Joshua*: The Brutal Birthing of a Group Identity,” *Mission Studies* 23 [2006]: 37).

7. Paul Copan, “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics,” *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008): 7–37.

are rational defeater arguments.<sup>8</sup> Of these, the first, the “bludgeoned baby” argument, is a rebutting defeater to the denial of (4) which aims to demonstrate that we can know immediately upon reflection that genocide is necessarily wrong because killing babies is a component part of genocide,<sup>9</sup> and killing babies is necessarily wrong.<sup>10</sup> While this seems to me to be a strong argument, I recognize that intuitions apparently differ (though I will seek to explain this divergence). Next, in the “Calley’s corruption” argument I will claim that even if divinely commanded genocide is not necessarily a moral atrocity, nonetheless it would be a moral atrocity for God to ask human beings to commit genocide given its dehumanizing moral and spiritual effect. Third, the “rationalizing genocide” argument seeks to undercut any remaining justification to believe the claim of proposition (3) that Yahweh ordered genocide. The argument here will focus on the ubiquitous human tendency to rationalize illegitimate violations of the principle of universality (also known as the categorical imperative or the golden rule). I will argue that the purported rationale for the Canaanite genocide especially warrants skepticism given the failure of this genocide to meet two key criteria that enable us to identify legitimate rationales for exceptions to the universal standard: the “criterion of extraordinary exceptions” and the “criterion of common origin.” Lastly, I will develop a prudential argument concerning the “cost of genocide” which argues from the negative practical implications of admitting the possibility of genocide into one’s moral framework to the conclusion that we ought to reject the Canaanite genocide.

Before we turn to consider these arguments, we need to define the terms “moral atrocity” and “moral monster.” I understand moral atrocity to be roughly equivalent to Marilyn McCord Adams’s definition of “horrendous evils,” namely as “evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole.”<sup>11</sup> Philosophers of religion have often sought to explain evil through a soul-making theodicy. But moral atrocities are so horrific and destructive that one might readily describe them as soul-destroying rather than soul-making. I define “moral monster” as a person who (a) willfully commits a moral atrocity or (b) commands another person to commit a moral atroc-

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8. There are two types of rational defeater: an undercutting defeater for *p* undermines the reason to think *p* is true, while a rebutting defeater for *p* provides a reason to think *p* is false. See John Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1986), 38–9.

9. Obviously genocide does not necessarily entail the killing of infants; the fact that it did in the case of the Canaanites is sufficient for my purposes.

10. If you have been influenced by Peter Singer and thus find this statement controversial, I trust you will at least agree that *killing perfectly health babies* is wrong; that is all I need for the argument.

11. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 26.

ity.<sup>12</sup> To simplify our argument we will be concerned here with the question of whether Yahweh is a moral monster *qua* (*b*), though the new atheists also clearly believe there is ample evidence that Yahweh is a moral monster *qua* (*a*).

### *Four Arguments Defending the Canaanite Genocide*

While the question of genocide does not figure prominently in Copan's defense of Yahweh, he does present four brief lines of argument which I have identified with four separate names. In the "collateral damage" argument Copan explains that civilian casualties are an anticipated but regrettable aspect of war: "A cause might be morally justified (for example, stopping the aggression of Hitler and Japan), even if innocent civilians might be killed—an unfortunate 'collateral damage' that comes with such scenarios."<sup>13</sup> But this argument fails, for while just war is always defensive and proscribes the targeting of non-combatants, Israel's holy war against Canaan was offensive and directly targeted noncombatants (including women and children).

Next, Copan's "irredeemable culture" argument defends the Canaanite genocide by charging that Canaanite culture was so corrupt that it was beyond redemption, rather like a house that is so structurally unsound that it must be condemned:

So Yahweh fought on behalf of Israel while bringing just judgment upon a Canaanite culture that had sunk hopelessly below any hope of moral return. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Yahweh issued his command in light of a morally-sufficient reason—the incorrigible wickedness of Canaanite culture.<sup>15</sup>

This defense assumes that a culture can reach a threshold of irredeemable moral corruption after which point the only answer for its citizens is mass extermination.<sup>16</sup> But this is a highly suspect assertion. Given the staggering implications of slaughtering an entire society, at the very least one should demand clear and compelling criteria for when a slaughter is required. Until these general guidelines are articulated and shown to apply in the case of Canaanite society, the irredeemable culture argument is little more than a

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12. Two points here. First, I am assuming that in commanding the atrocity one also desires the other to *commit* the atrocity. Second, I say *command* rather than *wills* in order to leave it open that God could, by way of his foreknowledge, create a world in which he foreknows and so wills that moral atrocities occur but neither causes nor even wants them to occur (e.g., transworld moral atrocities).

13. Copan, "Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?" 26.

14. *Ibid.*, 24–5.

15. *Ibid.*, 25.

16. This amounts to the postulation of a wholly malevolent race or society, the possibility of which I denied in footnote 5.

macabre just-so story along the lines of “how the Canaanites lost their right to live.”

The most glaring limitation of the irredeemable culture argument concerns the seemingly gratuitous slaughter of infants and small children. In response, Copan offers his “mercy killing” argument: “What then of the children? Death would be a mercy, as they would be ushered into the presence of God and spared the corrupting influences of a morally decadent culture.”<sup>17</sup> In short, Copan would have us believe that the Israelites were saving the Canaanite children from their own fate, rather like the marines in the film *Aliens* who mercifully kill the pitiful wretches that are incubating alien spawn. But if we have no guidelines to determine when a culture is irredeemable, then we cannot determine when a mercy killing is justified since the latter is dependent on the former. Hence, these two arguments fall together. In addition, the claim that an *infant* could be so formed by its culture that it would have to be killed is most doubtful.

Copan’s first three arguments also seriously misrepresent what is at stake in the Canaanite genocide since scripture does not understand these deaths as regrettable collateral damage, necessary exterminations, or merciful killings. Rather, they constitute ritual human sacrifices to Yahweh within Israel’s holy war. The Hebrew word *herem* is pivotal here as it refers to the consecration of something to God by being consigned for destruction. The Israelites believed that God had consigned the Canaanite men, women, and children to *herem* so that the slaughter constituted a religious act of *worship*,<sup>18</sup> a mass human sacrifice on a scale rivaling the ancient Aztecs.

On this disturbing note we turn to the “divine right” argument. Here Copan asks:

if God exists, does he have any prerogatives over human life? The new atheists seem to think that if God existed, he should have a status no higher than any human being. Thus, he has no right to take life as he determines. Yet we should press home the monumental difference between God and ordinary human beings. If God is the author of life, he is not obligated to give us seventy or eighty years of life.<sup>19</sup>

That being the case, he can take the lives of the Canaanites *indirectly* through Israel’s armies (or directly, as he did when Sodom was destroyed in Genesis 19) according to his good purposes and morally sufficient reasons.<sup>20</sup>

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17. Ibid. Interestingly, take away the theological context and this mercy killing argument seems to come right out of Peter Singer’s toolbox.

18. Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior: Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 34.

19. Copan, “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?” 25.

20. Ibid., 25–6.

In this argument Copan seems to progress from a relatively uncontroversial claim to a very contentious one. We may grant Copan the following:

- (a) God can rightly allow creatures to die.
- (b) God can rightly allow creatures to be killed.
- (c) God can rightly kill creatures.
- (d) God can rightly direct some creatures to kill other creatures.

But even granting (a)–(d), it is by no means obvious that we must also accept (e):

- (e) God can rightly direct a human being to kill a healthy baby.

Not only is this by no means obvious; it seems to me obviously false as I will argue in the next section.

### *Four Arguments Attacking the Canaanite Genocide*

In this section I will present four arguments to support the claim that if Yahweh is God then he did not command the Israelites to commit the Canaanite genocide. We will begin with what seems to me the most compelling argument which is rooted in an assertion that I believe every rational, properly functioning person cannot help but know: *it is always wrong to bludgeon babies.*

#### *Bludgeoned Babies*

When they are not busy defending moral atrocities in the Old Testament, virtually every Christian will express an unqualified and absolute condemnation of horrors like the vicious execution of children in war. David Neff writes: “the effects of violence and abuse on children are some of the most persuasive evidence that any language short of the vocabulary of evil is bankrupt.”<sup>21</sup> If evil is to have any meaning, then we will apply it naturally and without qualification to the intentional killing of healthy children, as in the 1994 Rwandan genocide when Hutus slaughtered approximately four hundred thousand Tutsi and moderate Hutu children.<sup>22</sup> The evil is even more horrifying given that the butchers carried out genocide with evangelistic zeal. One Catholic priest recounts “a woman who spent a whole day on the river bank killing other women who were handed over to her with a hammer. She was neither drunk nor under the effect of drugs. She was acting on her own free will, without any difficulty or remorse, without feelings; on the contrary,

21. David Neff, “Naming the Horror,” *Christianity Today*, April 2005, 74.

22. Barbara Coloroso, *Extraordinary Evil: A Brief History of Genocide* (New York: Viking Canada, 2007), xvi.

she was motivated by a great sense of morality.”<sup>23</sup> My question is simple: When we hear these accounts is our moral condemnation in any sense qualified? Do we withhold judgment pending further information about context, location, and other extenuating circumstances? If somebody tells me that Peter defecated in the frat house I will seek more information before concluding that he should be censured. For instance, did he defecate in the toilet or the living room? Did he have diarrhea or was he being malicious? Is our reaction to instances of genocide qualified in this way? Can we conceive of any qualifications that would justify the butchering of thousands of innocent children, let alone the systematic decimation of an entire population? On the contrary, I would submit that any properly functioning, moral, and intellectually honest human being will condemn these events without qualification. As John Prior pointedly asks, “Who among us today would deny that ethnic cleansing is categorically indefensible under any circumstance?”<sup>24</sup> Are we really to believe that an act of baby bludgeoning is suddenly defensible if we replace “Hutu bludgeoner” with “Israelite bludgeoner,” “Tutsi baby” with “Canaanite baby,” and the year 1994 with 1450 BC?

My unqualified condemnation of those who bludgeoned babies to death in Rwanda is rooted in a belief that you ought never ever bludgeon babies (NEBB). NEBB is not only a basic belief, it is as indubitable as any belief I have (and more indubitable than most). Though I am not clear on the mode by which I know NEBB, fortunately I need not know *how* I know to know *that* I know. It may be that I know NEBB as an immediate intuition,<sup>25</sup> or perhaps I know it by a faculty of moral perception that parallels sense perception.<sup>26</sup> Neither do I presently have a satisfactory account of how I know *a priori* that a ball cannot simultaneously be red and blue all over. But I know this: I do not believe merely that I fail to see how a ball could be red and blue all over; rather, I can see that it *cannot* be red and blue all over. And what of my belief, nay my knowledge, that it is necessarily evil to bludgeon a baby to death—say by cleaving its skull with a hatchet? Here too, it is not simply that I cannot see how bludgeoning a baby could be a morally praiseworthy act; rather, I can see that it cannot be. Let us be clear: we do not object to a given instance of bludgeoning babies because we do not believe Yahweh commanded it; we object to it *because it is evil*.

Though this argument seems strong to me, many Christians apparently reject NEBB, albeit with more than a little cognitive dissonance given their

23. Ralph J. Hartley, “To Massacre: A Perspective on Demographic Competition,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 80 (2007): 244.

24. Prior, “‘Power’ and ‘the Other’ in *Joshua*,” 37.

25. See Philip Stratton-Lake, ed., *Ethical Intuitionism: Reevaluations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

26. See Sarah McGrath, “Moral Knowledge by Perception,” in *Ethics, Philosophical Perspectives* 18, ed. John Hawthorne and Dean Zimmerman (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 209–28.



unqualified revulsion to the bludgeoning of Tutsi babies. Christians embrace cognitive dissonance by denying NEBB based on the belief that Yahweh commanded the killing of babies in scripture. But is a literal reading of these ancient narratives of military conquest really stronger than NEBB? To me this seems most doubtful.

### *Calley's Corruption*

Forty years ago the American public was riveted by the case of William Calley, an average young American who enlisted in the army in 1966 and two years later led the carnage at the horrific 1968 My Lai massacre. In this single event over 500 villagers including women, children, and the elderly, were massacred by US soldiers; Calley was later convicted for twenty-two of these murders.<sup>27</sup> Time and again the same terrible story has been repeated as average young men have gone off to war only to commit unthinkable moral atrocities. The current Iraq war has given us Jesse Spielman who was convicted in the rape and murder of fourteen-year-old Iraqi Abeer Qassim al-Janabi and her family.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to the popular myth that individuals like Calley and Spielman are prefab sociopaths who find in the military an outlet for their murderous tendencies, the evidence suggests that war creates, rather than merely uncovers, moral monsters. To begin with, war deeply scars the psyche of the soldier: "War is a mother lode of traumatic experiences and the chief source of the concept of PTSD."<sup>29</sup> Many combat veterans remain tormented by their experiences for life as with the soldier who observed a Vietnamese man's torture: "I watched the guy die. They tortured him till he couldn't take it. Then they took him behind the banana patch and blew his brains out. I never was the same after that. . . . Till the day I die, I'll never forget the smell of it and the screaming, you know, the feeling of it and everything."<sup>30</sup> As Richard Prystowsky observes, "war never leaves the soldier. It infects his very being; it remains lodged in his psyche, disquieting his soul."<sup>31</sup>

War also frequently transforms the soldier's character to the point where he can commit the kind of heinous moral atrocities ascribed to Calley and

27. See Philip Beidler, "Calley's Ghost," *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Winter 2003, 30–50.

28. Ryan Lenz, "Soldier Sentenced to 110 Years for Attack," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/04/AR2007080401631.html>.

29. "Rethinking Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Harvard Mental Health Letter* 24, no. 2 (2007): 1.

30. Chalsa M. Loo et. al., "Ethnic-Related Stressors in the War Zone: Case Studies of Asian American Vietnam Veterans," *Military Medicine* 172 (2007): 970.

31. Richard Prystowsky, "Bringing It All Back Home," *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, Summer 2005, 42.

Spielman. Another Vietnam veteran lamented in an interview: “I was transformed from a simple island boy into a demon, a monster. That accounts for the second tour of duty. Beginning to have fun, enjoy killing.”<sup>32</sup> For an unforgettable depiction of this process, watch the transformation of Leonard Lawrence during basic training in Stanley Kubrick’s film *Full Metal Jacket*.

One might rightly ask whether there is any evidence of positive effects arising from combat experience—so-called posttraumatic growth (PTG)—that could neutralize or at least moderate some of the soul-destroying effects of war. While there is some evidence for PTG arising from traumatic experience,<sup>33</sup> there is *no* evidence of PTG among combat soldiers. As Maguen et al. conclude in a study of veterans from the first Gulf War: “exposure to warfare was not associated with any index of growth.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, one study of Vietnam veterans demonstrated that “at the highest levels of exposure [to violence], individuals did not derive psychological benefits (e.g., solidarity with others).”<sup>35</sup> Maguen et al. thus conclude: “direct combat may not provide this reinforcement and may overwhelm existing coping capacities, thereby resulting in negative consequences and emotional sequelae.”<sup>36</sup> To put it another way, war turns soldiers into victims at best and psychopaths at worst.

If regular combat carried out under the modern world’s relatively civilized rules of engagement is psychologically and spiritually shattering, what would be the impact of carrying out a *herem* genocide of women and children? Even after being declared *herem*, Canaanite children would still scream, beg for mercy, cry, and bleed just like Israelite children. If William Calley and Jesse Spielman were destroyed by the experience of war, what type of effect would the bludgeoning of babies, children, women and the elderly have had upon the Israelites? Imagine the psychological agony of an Israelite soldier divinely commanded to hack up a Canaanite toddler one day only to bounce his Israelite toddler on his knee the next. It is hardly surprising then that the Israelites evince the subsequent brutalizing effect of war. Consider Menahem who, just prior to becoming king, ripped open pregnant women in battle (2 Kings 15:16). Or consider how the Israelites punished Adoni-bezek by severing his thumbs and big toes (Judg. 1:6). And then there is the psalmist who wishes that the heads of Babylonian babies be dashed against the rocks (Ps. 137:9). An unthinkable brutal hope, but a predictable outcome for a society founded on the dashed brains of Canaanite babies.

32. Loo et al., “Ethnic-Related Stressors in the War Zone,” 970.

33. Nancy Farwell, “In War’s Wake: Contextualizing Trauma Experiences and Psychosocial Well-Being among Eritrean Youth,” *International Journal of Mental Health* 32, no. 4 (2003): 39.

34. Shira Maguen et al., “Posttraumatic Growth among Gulf War I Veterans: The Predictive Role of Deployment-Related Experiences and Background Characteristics,” *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 11 (2006): 384.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 385.

This brings us to the second argument which, in recognition of William Calley, I call “Calley’s Corruption.” Even if we were to concede that an act of bludgeoning a baby could be morally praiseworthy, the command to perform this task which is (*sans* the divine command) *indistinguishable* from a moral atrocity, would itself constitute a moral atrocity due to the soul-destroying effect on the perpetrator. Hence, even if the act of killing a Canaanite infant did not constitute a moral atrocity *simpliciter*, it would constitute a moral atrocity *qua* its impact upon the Israelite soldiers.

### *Rationalizing Genocide*

Noam Chomsky has observed: “Among the most elementary of moral truisms is the principle of universality: we must apply to ourselves the same standards we do to others, if not more stringent ones. It is a remarkable comment on Western intellectual culture that this principle is so often ignored and, if occasionally mentioned, condemned as outrageous.”<sup>37</sup> While violations of the principle of universality are common, they typically come with a purported rationale. But for every legitimate rationale there are a hundred spurious rationalizations. I would propose that we can distinguish rationales from rationalizations by the following two criteria. To begin with, the “criterion of extraordinary exceptions” proposes that our skepticism of an alleged rationale should increase in direct proportion to the radicalness of the exception being proposed. A stranger in your backyard could provide a good rationale for invading your property uninvited (for example, the need to check your gas meter). But you would require a much better rationale from a stranger caught rummaging through your underwear drawer. Second, the “criterion of common origin” demands suspicion if an alleged rationale conforms to a well established pattern of rationalization.

The alleged rationale for the Canaanite genocide fails the criterion of extraordinary exceptions, for what could be more extraordinarily exceptional than the claim that one has a special license to bludgeon babies? But it also fails the criterion of common origin as becomes evident when we consider the typical elements in the narratives that are always invoked to justify genocide. There are commonly three elements in such justifications: (1) divide: first you distinguish between an in-group and out-group while attributing a superior authority or ontological status to the former; (2) demonize: next you accuse the out-group of promoting an injustice, inequality, or threat over against the in-group; (3) destroy: finally, you implore the in-group to redress the injustice, often with a divine or transcendent imprimatur.<sup>38</sup>

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37. Noam Chomsky, *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 3.

38. Compare the three psychological dimensions of bullying identified by Coloroso in *Extraordinary Evil*, 60.

The justifying narrative depends first on the primal division between the in-group and out-group. While we cannot absolutely dismiss the legitimacy of such divisions, we should be duly skeptical given the ubiquity of ethnocentrism and stereotyping.<sup>39</sup> The division may be cashed out in various ways as when the in-group is described as good or righteous while the out-group is maligned as evil or unrighteous.<sup>40</sup> The resulting process, as Jörn Rüsen observes, involves “an asymmetrical distribution of positive and negative values into the different realms of oneself and into the otherness of others. . . .”<sup>41</sup> Often the in-group’s status is attributed to ontological superiority, but the division may also be rooted in what Ben Kiernan calls “historical *anteriority*,” that is the view that the out-group has somehow abdicated their status or rights.<sup>42</sup> The sense that one belongs to the in-group is powerful as it draws members of the group together in solidarity.<sup>43</sup>

The next step to genocide comes when the in-group identifies an unjust distribution of resources between the two groups, often with the warning that the out-group presents an *intrinsic* threat to its well-being. As such, a justification begins to emerge by which the in-group may seek with its superior authority to redress both the present inequity as well as the ongoing threat presented by the out-group, by violence if necessary.<sup>44</sup> The in-group is now increasingly liable to interpret the call to redress the injustice in terms of historic destiny or divine calling.<sup>45</sup> At this point the in-group begins to engage the out-group violently. This may result in isolated genocidal acts or a more systematic means of extermination, or a combination thereof as in the Nazis’ gradual move from isolated genocidal acts (for example, *Kristallnacht*) to the *ad hoc einsatzgruppen* and finally to the demonic bureaucracy of the concentration camps. The in-group may also attack the out-group more indirectly through cultural or biological genocide.<sup>46</sup> While the transcendent justification may derive from various sources including national or ethnic destiny, undoubtedly the strongest form of teleological justification is religious where one believes that *God* has chosen the in-group to visit his punishment upon the out-group.

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39. J. J. Ray and G. P. Hall, “Need for Affiliation and Group Identification,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 135 (1995): 519.

40. Jörn Rüsen, “How to Overcome Ethnocentrism: Approaches to a Culture of Recognition by History in the Twenty-First Century,” *History and Theory* 43 (2004): 119.

41. *Ibid.*, 122.

42. Kiernan argues further that some genocides are rooted in the perceived “alleged *superiority*” of the out-group which presses the need for their extermination as a threat (*Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007], 22).

43. Rüsen, “How to Overcome Ethnocentrism,” 121.

44. Hartley, “To Massacre,” 238.

45. Rüsen, “How to Overcome Ethnocentrism,” 122.

46. For these distinctions see Kiernan, *Blood and Soil*, 13ff.

We repudiate the justifying narratives of the Nazi or Hutu not only because they are proposing most extraordinary exceptions, but also because their rationalizations conform to the same old “divide, demonize, destroy” typology that characterizes virtually all genocides. They all rationalize the carnage by asserting the superiority of their group, the inherent danger and injustice perpetuated by the out-group, and the divine/transcendent call to redress the injustice. The Canaanite genocide also conforms to this terrible pattern. The Israelites assert their superiority over the Canaanites based on historical anteriority, believing themselves to have been divinely chosen (Gen. 15:18–21) while the Canaanites have abdicated their right to the land and even their lives (Lev. 18:24–27). Indeed, so “contagious” are the Canaanites that they *must* be destroyed lest the Israelites be infected by them (Deut. 20:16–18). Not surprisingly, as is often the case in such rhetoric, there are internal inconsistencies in the justifying narrative. For instance, the Israelites judge the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice (Lev. 18:21) by sacrificing not only the Canaanite children but every other Canaanite as well!<sup>47</sup> (This is like punishing your neighbor for cutting down a few saplings by clear-cutting his entire forest!) In another inconsistency, while the Canaanites must be destroyed as a contagion, Yahweh later opts to keep some alive for Israelite target practice (Judg. 3:1–4). Of course Israel’s neighbors also practiced *herem* warfare and presumably invoked very similar justifying narratives.<sup>48</sup> But then any objective observer can see the gross double standard.<sup>49</sup> Surely it is implausible to believe that the Israelites’ genocide is the single divinely mandated exception in a long history of horrifying atrocities!

### *The Cost of Genocide*

Our first two arguments are intended as rebutting defeaters to the denial of (4) while our third argument is an undercutting defeater to the claim of (3). But all three have operated at the rational level. The final argument shifts to the ground of practical reason with a prudential argument that proposes we ought to reject (3) and accept (4) and (7) based on the practical consequences of accepting (3). The argument is simple: reason and experience establish that belief in the Canaanite genocide has contributed to a long history of moral atrocities. Hence, if we reject the Canaanite genocide we remove a powerful ideological repository for genocide rationalization.

47. Actually this probably is consistent since Yahweh apparently never objects to child sacrifice *simpliciter* but rather to child sacrifice to any deity other than himself. See Exod. 22:20 and Lev. 18:21.

48. Lauren A. S. Monroe, “Israelite, Moabite and Sabean War-*herem* Traditions and the Forging of National Identity: Reconsidering the Sabaeen Text RES 3945 in Light of Biblical and Moabite Evidence,” *Vetus Testamentum* 57 (2007): 321.

49. John J. Collins, “The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003): 9.

There is widespread agreement that the “baptism” of violence in the past justifies use of violence in the present. As Schmidt and Schröder observe, “There exists no more important resource for an ideology of violence than the representation of past violence.”<sup>50</sup> This is especially true when that past violence is idealized within a religious framework. Hence, those who wish to reduce the future possibility of justifying moral atrocities religiously will reject the use of religious narratives to justify past moral atrocities. As Sam Harris puts it:

Mahavira, the Jain patriarch, surpassed the morality of the Bible with a single sentence: “Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being.” Imagine how different our world might be if the Bible contained this as its central precept. Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible.<sup>51</sup>

Thus Christians have justified moral atrocities throughout history by appealing to a theologically defensible reading of the Bible. John Howard Yoder recognizes that “for centuries, at least from the time of Augustine to the age of Enlightenment, mainstream Christians took for granted that the ancient Hebrew model does count as justification for Empire and genocide.”<sup>52</sup> Jeremy Cott summarizes the historic link between brutalizing violence in Canaan and Christendom:

When the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan, slaughtering the inhabitants (Jos. 11:20), raping women who were the mere booty of war (Dt. 20:14), putting whole towns to the edge of the sword, leaving “nothing that breathed” (Dt. 20:16; Jos. 11:11, 14; cf. 1 Sam. 15:3), they believed that they were the elect of God. When the Carolingians, led by Charlemagne in their project of Christianizing northern Europe, marched into Saxon territory, hanging 4500 people in a single day, they believed that they were the elect of God. The Crusaders, as we know, were animated by a similar inspiration.<sup>53</sup>

It is a simple fact of history that time and again the church has appealed to the legacy of divine violence to justify heinous and murderous actions.

This final argument can be summarized by retooling the old apologetics chestnut where you consider whether, upon meeting a gang of intimidating men in a dark alley, you would be relieved to learn that they had just

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50. Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder, “Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices,” in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, ed. Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder (London: Routledge, 2001), 8, quoted in Prior, “‘Power’ and ‘the Other’ in *Joshua*,” 39.

51. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 23.

52. John Howard Yoder, “Texts that Serve or Texts that Summon? A Response to Michael Walzer,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20 (1992): 230.

53. Jeremy Cott, “The Biblical Problem of Election,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984): 201.

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come from a Bible study. In our scenario there are two different Bible study groups. Both came from a study of the genocide in Joshua, but they were given two very different explanations of it. Group A was taught that God is a warrior who occasionally directs his followers to engage in violent acts including human sacrifice. Group B was taught that the Canaanite genocide was abhorrent and that God, as perfectly loving, considers all human sacrifice abominable. All other things being equal, which group would you prefer to meet?

### *Conclusion*

In this paper I have argued that genocide is always a moral atrocity from which it follows that if Yahweh is God then Yahweh did not command the Canaanite genocide. To this end I critiqued four arguments Paul Copan uses to justify the genocide while providing four counter arguments against the possibility of divinely mandated genocide. While this may not yet tell us how we should respond to biblical narratives of divinely sanctioned violence, at the very least it will save Christians from the sorry spectacle of attempting to convince ourselves and others of that which everybody knows cannot be true.<sup>54</sup>

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