

‘I want to give the baby to God’

Three theses on God and devotional child killing

By

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A couple years ago I purchased a copy of Zondervan’s bestselling “Adventure Bible” for my daughter. The book included the NIV text replete with a jungle safari theme, cartoon mascot characters, and green-colored font. Since it was supposed to be a children’s Bible, I was curious to see how it handled some of the R-rated passages of scripture and so I turned to Deuteronomy 20 for a representative sampling. As it turned out, this text came with a green parrot who explained in a factoid bubble the conditions under which Israelite men could be exempted from battle. But alas, the parrot overlooked the genocidal elephant in the room. In other words, the Adventure Bible simply *ignored* the real problem with Deuteronomy 20 while offering some information which, under the circumstances, was of marginal interest at best. Unfortunately this

practice of ignoring or misdirecting us away from the real problems with what I call biblical “moral atrocity texts” (MATs)¹ is not limited to children’s Bibles. Indeed, it is also to be found in preachers, theologians and apologists, particularly in my own evangelical tradition.

For the sake of streamlining our discussion I will focus on one specific moral issue that appears in some MATs: devotional child killing. I define devotional child killing as the act of killing one or more children with the primary or sole intent of demonstrating profound dedication, commitment, or fidelity to a third party. With that definition in mind, I submit that the following statement represents a widely held moral intuition:

- (1) The devotional killing of children for God can never be morally praiseworthy or even morally permissible.²

In the same way that properly functioning moral adults recognize it could never be praiseworthy or permissible to engage in the devotional rape or torture of a child, so we intuitively recognize it could never be praiseworthy to engage in the devotional killing of a child.

This brings us to the biblical concept of *herem*, the giving over of material possessions and living things to God for destruction. The *herem* evinces the marks of a devotional act, the destruction of objects to demonstrate dedication, commitment or fidelity to God. When I was fifteen in a pious, post-Bible camp frenzy, I decided to commit my Beach Boys and Who albums to the *herem* by smashing them on my parents’ driveway. The act itself was painful and was

¹ I define an MAT as a text which adopts a positive or neutral moral appraisal of actions which, according to our moral reasoning, cannot possibly be morally positive or neutral.

² Admittedly not everybody agrees with this intuition. In fact, historically many people have apparently believed that the devotional killing of children was a good thing. But then many have also believed that man-boy love was a good thing, and that lack of consensus hardly dissuades me from the conviction that it is not. *Mutatis mutandis*, I would say, for those who have affirmed devotional child killing.

made in full knowledge of the goods of which I was willingly depriving myself. Thus it was, in my mind, a fitting demonstration of my pious devotion. In scripture one finds not only material possessions and living things (i.e. livestock) being offered in the *herem*, but human beings as well, including children. A clear example is 1 Samuel 15 where the Lord, speaking through Samuel, commands Saul to kill Amalekite children and infants.³ This brings us to our second proposition:

(2) Some texts in the Bible describe God as commanding and/or commending the devotional killing of children.

Many thoughtful Christians are deeply troubled by the conflict between (1) and (2). But how should we address it? Generally speaking when a conflict between belief claims arises, we invoke, even if only implicitly, what I call the conflict resolution principle:

CR Principle: In a conflict between two propositions p and q, if the evidence to believe p is much stronger than the evidence to believe q, then if one has enough reason to accept either, it will be p rather than q.

But in fact there is not a conflict between (1) and (2). That conflict only arises if we assume two additional proposition:

(3) Texts in the Bible that describe God as commanding and/or commending acts of devotional killing of children should be interpreted as affirming that God did in fact command and/or commend those acts.

³ Another example is found in 2 Kings 3:27 where the king of the Moabites sacrifices his son on the city wall. According to some exegetes, the fact that the fury against the Israelites immediately following this act was “great”, thereby forcing them to retreat, suggests that the sacrifice was accepted by Yahweh.

(4) Texts in the Bible that describe God as commanding and/or commending acts of devotional killing of children are inerrant with respect to the moral and historical perspectives of the human author.

Thus, if we reject either (3) or (4), then the conflict, as such, disappears. So then we must ask: is the evidence to accept (3) and (4) stronger than the evidence to accept (1)?

I believe the answer is an unequivocal no. On the contrary, I will argue that the evidence we have for (1) is much stronger than the evidence for (3) and (4). I will defend this claim with my Moral Certainty (MC) thesis:

(MC) thesis: a properly functioning and moral human being can see that (1) must be true and thus (3) and (4) cannot both be true.

I believe the evidence we have to accept (1) is so strong that it is an intrinsic defeater to any counter claims, including the joint affirmation of (3) and (4). In other words, the evidence for (3) and (4) simply *could not* be as strong as the evidence for (1).⁴ While I would rather that all would accept my (MC) thesis, being something of a realist I recognize that some may remain unpersuaded. For them I offer the Doubtful Bible thesis:

(DB) thesis: for all we know (1) may be (or probably is) false, but we still have inadequate grounds to believe (3) and (4) are both true.

⁴ It is possible that children are non-sentient creatures which become sentient on their thirteenth birthday at which point they gain false memory beliefs which correlate to past experience as their non-sentient selves. If this would turn out to be true it would surely lower my conviction that (1) is true. And one can identify other equally implausible logical scenarios. But the emphasis remains on “equally implausible”.

In other words even if we reject (1), a person still needs independent grounds to accept (3) and (4) and these grounds are lacking. Again, some may disagree and aver that the evidence for (3) and (4) is strong. To these folk I offer my Conscientious Objector thesis:

(CO) thesis: (1) is likely false and (3) and (4) are both likely true but for some people the intuitive force of (1) is such that they ought to reject (3) and (4) and retain commitment to (1).

While these three theses are incompatible with one another, they nonetheless have the common goal of opening up space for new ways of accepting the MATs as scripture that are consistent with our basic moral intuitions.

Moral Certainty thesis

In his *Confession* Leo Tolstoy recounts witnessing a public execution in Paris:

When I saw the head divided from the body and heard the sound with which it fell separately into the box, I understood, not with my reason, but with my whole being, that no theory of the wisdom of all established things, nor of progress, could justify such an act; and that if all the men in the world from the day of creation, by whatever theory, had found this thing necessary, it was not so; it was a bad thing, and that therefore I must judge of what was right and necessary, not by what men said and did, not by progress, but what I felt to be true in my heart.⁵

⁵ *My Confession and the Spirit of Christ's Teaching* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1887), 18.

Whether or not one agrees with Tolstoy's intuitions on capital punishment, he is surely right to note that personal acquaintance with specific events or states of affairs can bring us a new understanding of moral truth. Fortunately one need not have direct personal acquaintance (e.g. witnessing an act) to gain this sharpened moral clarity, for it can also come through careful and sustained reflection on specific scenarios or cases. In short, moral intuition based on cases is foundational for ethical theorization. As Eleonore Stump observes:

It's true that our moral principles and our ethical theories rely on reason. But we build those principles and theories, at least in part, by beginning with strong intuitions about individual cases that exemplify wrongdoing, and we construct our ethical theories around those intuitions. We look for what the individual cases of wrongdoing have in common, and we try to codify their common characteristics into principles. Once the principles have been organized into a theory, we may also revise our original intuitions until we reach some point of reflective equilibrium, where our intuitions and theories are in harmony. But our original intuitions retain an essential primacy. If we found that our ethical theory countenanced those Nazi experiments on children, we'd throw away the theory as something evil itself.⁶

With this in mind, I propose that we begin by reflecting on a case that "exemplifies wrongdoing" and allow our intuitive reaction to the case to serve as the foundation of subsequent ethical reflection on the moral status of devotional child killing.

The place: Plano, Texas. The time: November 23, 2004. The deity: Yahweh. While the hymn "He touched me" played in the background, Dena Schlosser calmly informed the 911

⁶ Stump, "The Mirror of Evil," *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 238.

operator that she had amputated the arms of her ten month old daughter Margaret.⁷ “I want to give the baby to God,”⁸ she had told her husband. And so she did. In later discussions with a court psychologist Schlosser explained that God wanted her to offer her infant child to him as a sign of her devotion. And so, as with Abraham’s willing offer of Isaac, Schlosser responded to the divine command, only in this instance no angel ever intervened.⁹ When police arrived at the apartment they found Schlosser placidly listening to hymns, her clothing soaked in blood while Maggie lay dying in her crib with her arms severed at the shoulders.

As Tolstoy believed he *knew* the evil of capital punishment when the head hit the basket, so I am sure the first responders to the Schlosser residence knew the heinous evil of devotional child killing. But what is it that they knew? Since Schlosser was later diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder a person could argue that all we can know here is that it is wrong for a mother to kill her child based on false beliefs arising from mental illness. But how do we know that Schlosser was actually delusional? The determinative factor in the diagnosis is her belief that God wanted her to kill her child and her subsequent actions based on that belief. But therein lies the dilemma, for our knowledge that this was a tragic frenzy rather than a triumph of faith depends on our belief that God would not command or commend such actions. And that conviction is rooted in the belief that such actions are intrinsically evil. In other words, the person who only judges the wrongness of the action based on the assumption of mental illness must concede that Maggie’s death could have been a triumph of faithfulness. And with no sure

⁷ “Texas Mother Who Killed Baby is Acquitted on Insanity Grounds,” *The New York Times* (April 8, 2006), A11.

⁸ See “Husband testifies in case of woman who cut off baby’s arms,” (Feb. 14, 2006), at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,184731,00.html>. Cf. Alex Alvarez and Ronet Bachman, *Violence: The Enduring Problem* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 146.

⁹ Schlosser believed God wanted her to sever her baby’s arms as well as her own arms and head as divine offerings. “Mother Says God Told Her to Cut Baby,” available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/20/AR2006022001197.html>.

way to tell that God did not direct Schlosser, our judgment of her actions would have to be tentative in a way that is wholly incongruent with our unqualified intuitions about the case.¹⁰

Let's grant for the sake of argument that we knew Schlosser had misperceived the divine will due to schizoaffective disorder. Would that be sufficient to know that Maggie's death could not be praiseworthy or at least permissible? I don't think so. Consider another case in which Schlosser falsely believes God is commanding her to trim her ten foot blue arrow juniper into the form of George Beverly Shea. Assuming that she does a good job, we may respect the feat as an admirable act of faith and commitment while nonetheless lamenting the underlying delusion. But no similar grace is extended to the killing of her baby. In that case we don't simply lament the delusion; we also consider the act an egregious (natural or moral) evil. In other words, while delusional hedge trimming is a possibly praiseworthy activity, delusional infant mutilation is not. If we have such strong moral intuitions that the killing of American baby Margaret could not be morally praiseworthy or permissible then why would we surrender this conviction for Amalekite baby Margalit? Surely we ought to recognize the intuitive moral force of (1) and reject (3) and/or (4).

Given that (1) has a far superior epistemic status to (3) and (4), how is it that people accept (3) and (4) and deny (1)? Frankly it is hard for me to see how one can do this without a complex combination of diversion, denial, and cognitive dissonance. J. Budziszewski writes: "St. Paul said that the knowledge of God's law is 'written on our hearts, our consciences also bearing witness.' The way natural law thinkers put this is to say that they constitute the deep structure of

¹⁰ I'm not denying that it would be possible to know it, but we could not know it simply by appraising the case itself, and that is sufficient to sustain my objection.

our minds. That means that so long as we have minds, *we can't not know* them.”¹¹ I agree with Budziszewski that there are many things we can't not know. For instance, we can't not know the inherent wrongness of devotionally raping and torturing infants. But surely if any action belongs on this ignominious list it is devotional child killing. Whether the child is a Texan or a Tutsi, an American or an Amalekite, it surely matters not: we know the evil of such actions as surely as we know anything.

I'm going to conclude this section with an aside. One hears the concern from many quarters today that religious or ethical certainty increases the threat of religious violence and consequently a safer world is one in which we hold our moral, metaphysical and theological beliefs more lightly. For instance, John J. Collins identifies “God-like certainty that stops all discussion” as “the most basic connection between the Bible and violence.”¹² But if my analysis of (1) is correct then it is not *certainty* that is the problem but rather *what it is you are certain of*. The suicide bomber certain of God's approval for his mission earns our condemnation, but the imam certain that God would never command or commend suicide bombing earns our commendation. It is precisely as we recognize the universal and inviolable status of propositions like (1) that the world becomes a safer place. So it seems to me that our moral intuitions provide an intrinsic defeater to any putative claim of morally permissible or praiseworthy instances of devotional child killing.

The Doubtful Bible thesis

¹¹ “Escape from Nihilism,” *Regeneration Quarterly*, 4, no. 1 (1998), 12-15. For further discussion see Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide* (Dallas, TX: Spence, 2004).

¹² John J. Collins. *Does the Bible justify violence?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 32.

While I believe (1) provides a defeater for the morality of any case of devotional child killing, I recognize that not everyone shares my conviction. But even if a person believes (1) is false or likely to be false, that does not automatically mean that (3) and (4) are true for they still require independent evidence, presumably evidence of a *very* high order.

To illustrate the problem consider reports of purported alien abductions. Whitley Strieber claims to have been abducted and subjected to unspeakable indignities by aliens from another world. I don't deny the possibility, but given the extraordinary *prima facie* implausibility of the claim I will seek very persuasive evidence before I would seriously countenance the claim. We would surely doubt the wisdom, even rationality, of anyone who accepted such extraordinary reports without seeking adequate supporting evidence. So if my neighbor reported being abducted by aliens I might take him seriously if I saw a spaceship hovering over his house or discovered a large crop circle in his cornfield the following day. Just as we seek high evidence for alien abduction claims, so we seek it for putative claims of praiseworthy or permissible devotional child killing. So what evidence do we have to accept (3) and (4)?

For most people, the primary evidence for (3) is rooted in the straightforward reading of the MATs coupled with a substantial supporting hermeneutical tradition. But is it possible that some texts have been misread? Scholars like Edwin Good and Carolyn Sharp have drawn our attention to the extensive presence of irony within many scriptural texts, including irony that can neutralize otherwise morally problematic texts. Sharp, for instance, argues for an ironic reading of the massive two day slaughter narrated in Esther 9.¹³ While this may be a promising avenue

¹³ Sharp summarizes four lines of evidence from the text which support the interpretation that this slaughter is being condemned by the writer through a description of ironic excess. See *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 68-69.

for dealing with some MATs, there is little likelihood of neutralizing all MATs by appealing to irony, at least with respect to the intentions of human authors and redactors.

There is another possibility however, for an inspired text could possess a divergence between the historico-grammatical *sensus litteralis* and the *sensus plenior*.¹⁴ Could this be the case with a text like 1 Samuel 15? Could God ultimately be treating this text ironically by appropriating it into his canon? I'm not sure but there are hints that this is a possibility. When fundamental contradictions appear in a work by a highly competent author, it is reasonable to suppose that the author has included the contradictions for a reason, and ironizing one set of texts that are incompatible with another is one reasonable interpretive response. Thus the reader of *The Red Badge of Courage* might puzzle over the apparent depiction of Henry Fleming becoming a man through battle, a view that seems incompatible both with the book's broader themes and Crane's own views. And so one response, and that taken by a majority of literary critics, is to ironize the pro-war texts.

God is by definition the maximally competent author and the MATs within scripture do give rise to some notable apparent contradictions. For instance, we are told on several occasions that God hates child sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31, 18:10; Jeremiah 7:30-1, 19:5). And yet as Susan Niditch observes, the *herem* killing of children includes a sacrificial dimension: "deep in the mythological framework of Israelite thought, war, death, sacrifice, the ban, and divine satiation are integrally associated.... To dissociate the Israelite ban from the realm of the sacred and from the concept of sacrifice is to ignore the obvious"¹⁵ Or, to take another example, the imprecatory psalms countenance a hatred of enemies which is

¹⁴ In this paper I will define *sensus litteralis* as the intended sense(s) of the human author and/or subsequent redactors while *sensus plenior* will refer to the fuller sense intended by God.

¹⁵ *War in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 41.

difficult to reconcile, to say the least, with Jesus' call to love one's enemies. If scripture is the product of a maximally competent author we could approach these tensions by ironizing the problematic MATs with respect to a *sensus plenior* in the same way that literary critics ironize the pro-war sections of *The Red Badge of Courage* with respect to the intentions of anti-war Crane. I don't know whether this is correct or not, but the very fact that this is possible introduces a variable that undermines our grounds to accept (3).

Now let us consider (4): what grounds do we have to think of the MATs as inerrant? Actually there is a prior question: what do we mean by inerrancy? There was a time when Joshua 10:13 would have been taken to be an inerrant scientific description of the sun's ceasing its course across the heavens. We now know that if any celestial body stood still on that day it was the earth, not the sun.¹⁶ As a result, we must concede that the human writer was in error in his scientific and historical description of the event. Needless to say, inerrantists reconciled themselves to heliocentrism long ago. But if inerrancy can accommodate errors in the historical and scientific understanding of the human author, why can't it also accommodate errors in the moral perspective of the human author? C.S. Lewis famously suggested something like this, at least concerning the imprecatory psalms:

[W]e must not either try to explain them away or to yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious.¹⁷

¹⁶ Daniel Hill pointed out that according to relativity theory one could adopt a frame of reference in which the earth is the fixed center of the universe and relative to that frame it was in fact the sun that stood still. But this suggestion seems to me to assume an implausibly atomized understanding of sentential meaning. The proposition expressed in Joshua 10:13 was embedded within a set of implicature which assume a particular picture of the world which we now know to be false.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 22.

The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness are not removed. The total result is not ‘the Word of God’ in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history [or, presumably, morality]. It carries the Word of God ; and we ... receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and so learning its overall message.¹⁸

In the same way that inerrancy was expanded to include human errors of science and history, so it might be expanded to include human moral errors, so long as the divine author is inerrant in his inclusion of those errant statements. Consider as an analogy the character of Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Although a Christian might consider Ivan to have made a number of false statements about God and the problem of evil, this hardly means that Dostoevsky was in error by including Ivan’s voice in the work. And surely it would be absurd to attempt to reconcile Ivan to Alyosha as if both must somehow be seen to express Dostoevsky’s own views. Rather, we recognize that Ivan differs radically from Dostoevsky’s voice, and that this conflict reveals the masterwork of the author. Ivan might be errant but Dostoevsky most certainly is not. Given that we could think of the Bible in these terms, it is clear that we have no more reason to accept (4) than (3). So in summary, it seems to me that we lack evidence to accept (3) and (4) just like we lack evidence to accept Strieber’s earnest testimony of alien abduction.

The Conscientious Objector thesis

Let’s say that a critic rejects my first two theses and insists that she has a high confidence in the truth of (3) and (4) and a low confidence in the truth of (1). Even so, all is not lost. I shall be

¹⁸ Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 112.

satisfied if I can convince this critic that it is at least a reasonable and moral position for a Christian to adopt a conscientious objector position by rejecting (3) and (4) and retaining (1), and moreover, that by conceding this she also concedes the legitimacy of this dissenter's voice within the Christian moral community.

To illustrate this claim we can begin with a recent debate in the *Trinity Journal* between Arminian theologian Tom McCall and Calvinist John Piper. After McCall articulated some of the more disturbing implications of Calvinism, Piper made a startling concession to the Arminian position: "Do not yet believe what I say. Your conscience forbids it. You dare not believe statements about God which, according to your own conscience, can only mean that God is what he is not."¹⁹ I think Piper is right. If, upon deep and careful reflection, a Christian finds the core claims of Calvinism irreconcilable with their most basic beliefs about the goodness and love of God, then they ought to reject Calvinism. By the same token, if upon deep and careful reflection a Christian finds the core claims of divinely commanded devotional child killing irreconcilable with their most basic beliefs about the goodness and love of God, then they ought to reject divinely commanded devotional child killing. Thus, even if a person believes they have grounds to accept (3) and (4) they should not think these propositions are somehow obligatory for the Christian who finds themselves compelled to accept (1) since like Tolstoy they must judge of what was right and necessary, not by what men said and did, not by progress, but what they feel to be true in their heart.

¹⁹ John Piper, "I believe in God's Self-Sufficiency: A Response to Thomas McCall," *Trinity Journal*, 29, no. 2 (2008), 234.

However, my claim is not simply that the conscientious objector should be allowed to hold his views, but that those views represent a legitimate moral position which should be represented more widely within the community of faith. By analogy, even if a medical community accepts the pro-choice position regarding abortion or euthanasia, that community is impoverished if it suppresses dissenting views on these difficult liminal ethical issues. Likewise, a Christian community that does not recognize the place for dissent on difficult liminal issues is similarly impoverished. To end with a concrete claim, I believe that this obliges those involved in Christian education from the initial teaching of “Joshua fought the battle of Jericho” to Sunday schoolers straight through to the Sunday sermon ought to present the range of opinion on this difficult position.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that in the conflict between (1) and (3)/(4) we ought to choose (1). But even if we do not accept (1), we still lack adequate grounds to accept (3) and (4). And even if we still accept (3) and (4), we ought to affirm those Christians who in good conscience reject (3) and/or (4) in favor of (1).²⁰

²⁰ Thanks to Daniel Hill and Dale Tuggy who read earlier drafts of this paper and offered many helpful criticisms.