




C O V E R S T O R Y

# IS GOD **Immoral?**

Another look at *Why evil?*

*By Desmond Ford*





SOME READERS OF RECENT BOOKS BY FORMER JESUIT JACK MILES, especially his *God—A Biography*, have been challenged regarding orthodox Christian beliefs about right and wrong, an inspired Bible, and a righteous God.

Miles set forth a God who only gradually evolved to morality and cites the Old Testament to illustrate his case. Miles has swayed some of my friends, and I confess to being horrified by what seems to me comparable to the surrender at Singapore in 1942. (The Japanese were almost out of ammunition and could not have continued Singapore's siege more than a few more days. But "pacifist" British generals surrendered prematurely—to Churchill's indignation.)

Here is a quote from Miles, a Process theologian, cited by Ruth Tucker:

"The plot begins with God's desire for a self-image. It thickens when God's self-image becomes a maker of self-images, and God resents it. From this initial conflict, others emerge. ... Why did God create the world? Why, on flimsy grounds, did he destroy it so soon after creating it? Why, having so long shown no interest whatsoever in the wars of mankind, did he suddenly become a warrior? Why, having attended slightly, if at all, to morality, did he become a moralist? As his covenant with Israel seemed to break down, what consequences seemed to loom for him? What kind of life awaited him after that impending breakup? How did he adjust to his failure to keep his promises he made through the prophets? What is his experienced life as a being without parents, or spouse, or children?"<sup>1</sup>

This is somewhat typical of many Process theologians who believe in a finite God. And the quotation is a key to all that follows in this strange book by Miles. It carries the mark of the cloven hoof—the denial of the supernatural in the origin of Scripture, and the theory that the Bible by its moral and scientific errors disqualifies an omniscient God as its source.<sup>2</sup>

### Mystery of Evil

The issue at stake is one form of the mystery of evil. But philosophers are agreed that evil itself would be no problem if there were no God. All moral outrage is irrational unless the background premise of thought is the existence of Deity. So it is belief in God that creates our problem regarding evil in all its forms.

J.S. Whale commented: "It is our religious sense, our certainty of God, which makes this problem of evil so real. The keenness

of our scandal at innocent anguish comes not because there is no God of Comfort but because there is. We have seen His splendour shining in the face of Christ upon the Tree; and we know."<sup>3</sup>

What Old Testament grist do Miles (and atheists in general) use? Favorite passages are Numbers chapter 31 and I Samuel chapter 15. The slaughter of the Midianites and the Amalekites seem at first glance entirely heartless and beyond justification. Many things in the Law of Moses invite criticism. But things are not always what they seem.

Of course there are other difficult passages also, such as Jael's slaughter of Sisera and Jephthah's dealing with his daughter, and the closing chapters of Judges. But there is absolutely nothing in the Old Testament so horrifying as our Lord's words recorded in Mark 9:42-49: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ... And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ... And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. For every one will be salted with fire" (RSV).

### Love and Punishment

The Lord of love himself spoke more pungently about the punishment of evil than any of his predecessors or successors. Perhaps we should remember the platitude from Old Testament exegetes: God threatened many things so that they might not happen. In other words, fearful warnings are intended to turn us away from doing wrong. This is also true of jarring historical accounts.

Nevertheless, we are confronted with dreadful things that DID happen. What about them? Possibly the first note to be made is that Christians have long been aware of the moral challenge found in such passages, and answers have been bountiful and rational. The second thing that should be said is that the Bible contains 31,175 verses, and the percentage of ambivalent or ambiguous ones on morality by a generous reckoning does not



exceed 3 percent. Are we to interpret the 97 percent by the 3 percent, or vice versa? Isn't it rather strange that critics of the evangelical faith seem blind to most of Holy Writ, while a tiny proportion of it is magnified in their eyes?

Our Lord himself has told us that there were things in the Old Testament record that were permitted because of "the hardness of their hearts." We do not have the right to expect New Testament morality in all its wonderful maturity in primitive ages.

H.L. Hastings, a well-known Christian debater of earlier times, could write at length on "The Wonderful Law" of Moses because he read in it standards of goodness that surpassed all contemporary cultures. His writing is quoted at length, because only a few people would have access to this volume. Keep in mind that these words were penned in the 19th century, and some words and concepts differ from those familiar to us more than a hundred years later.

### Old Testament Irrelevant

"Now it is asserted in various quarters that the Mosaic law and the Old Testament writings connected therewith are absurd, obscene, and oppressive; and that the acts done under that

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law, and professedly by divine direction, were, in themselves considered, unjust, unwise, and unworthy of the character of a great and good Creator and Governor. Others, on the other hand, of equal intelligence and acquaintance with the facts in the case, make directly opposing assertions. In such circumstance, to what conclusion shall we arrive? The difference cannot be in the law; it must be in the men who read it. Both look at the same landscape; some see one class of object, and others see things entirely different. Which class sees things as they are? Or are both mistaken in their view of things?"<sup>4</sup>

"It is charged that the Jews under the Law of Moses were guilty of great immoralities. But why should they be blamed for that? If the laws enforcing purity and forbidding vice were fabulous and deceptive from beginning to end; if the teachings of Jesus Christ are entirely void of all authority; why should *not* men disregard all such imaginary restrictions, and conduct their affairs after their own sweet wills? Monkeys, apes, and baboons have exhibited no particular squeamishness concerning matters of this kind. ...

"If the Law of Moses is a fable, a forgery, and a fraud, then the principles contained in that law cannot be used by infidels to impeach or accuse the men to whom that law was given. If there *are* no principles of truth and righteousness and justice; if we have nothing to guide us but the instincts derived from brutal ancestors; then on what principle can we question or condemn any act committed by any person, under any circumstances? There is no law, and there can be no transgression. But if we admit the existence of a God, and if he has implanted law in the human heart, or inscribed it on tables of stone, then we have a basis upon which we may argue."<sup>5</sup>

"We are told that the Bible is a bad book, obscene, indelicate, and unfit to be read. Before this grave charge can be established we must consider that the Bible was written in a different age and country from our own. ... Customs differ in different countries; and what is improper in one country may give no offense in another. So there may be a simplicity, or even a barbarism, of language, which, though indelicate to our ears, may have been entirely consistent with purity and propriety at the time and in the countries where it was written. ...


### Not the Words of Moses

"Again, the words that appear to us indelicate in the Bible are *not* the words *written* by Moses or the prophets, but they are English words used by the translators; and they are words which were used in respectable society when the Bible was translated in 1611, that is, in the time of Shakespeare. And for every expression in the Bible which seems objectionable, we could probably find a dozen in the writings of Shakespeare which would not pass current in modern society."<sup>6</sup>

"The Law of Moses countenances no such cruelties and barbarities as flogging women and children, or any one else for poverty or begging. In its enactments principles of humanity prevail. If we compare the Jewish law with the customs of the nations around them, the difference will be manifest. The kings of Israel had no "burning, fiery furnace" for the punishment of offenders, like the king of Babylon; no "den of lions," like the Medes and Persians. They were not accustomed to bore out people's eyes or cut off their hands, like the Assyrians. The Law of Moses knew nothing of crucifixion, which was practised among the Romans. ... It knew nothing of punishment by torture on the rack, or breaking on the wheel, of impaling, of flaying alive, of roasting over a slow fire, of drowning, of exposure to serpents and wild beasts, of tearing to pieces by wild horses, of drawing and quartering, of exposing upon the gibbet, of fixing human heads and hands over gates, on walls, or in public places; or any of the similar cruel and horrible inflictions which abounded even in civilized countries almost down to the present time.

"The punishments prescribed by the Law of Moses were restitution, stripes, the sword, and stoning; and in certain cases





burning was inflicted, but this is not said to be burning *alive*, but was probably the burning of those who had been previously put to death. Persons *after* being slain, were sometimes hung up, and thus publicly exhibited; but they were not to remain exposed overnight, but must at once be buried. ...

“Of course a code of martial laws, for the government of a people just escaped from slavery, in a country where prisons, jails and reformatories were unknown, and where punishment must of necessity be summary, would necessarily differ materially from law established under different circumstances. But in spite of all these difficulties, the Law of Moses must still be regarded as a law where mercy rejoiced against judgment.”<sup>7</sup>

“This law—‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’—stood as a perpetual guardian over the poor. It counted every man’s person sacred. Brutal men are cowardly, and such a law as this naturally restrained their brutality, and protected the helpless against assaults and violence.”<sup>8</sup>

### Punishment Merited

“The nations of Canaan had forfeited their right to live. They were utterly debased and brutalized. Incest, bestiality, and every form of the grossest vices was prevalent among them. ... What must have been the state of Canaanitish society, when the exceptional depths of horrible crime which startle civilizations were but the *dead level* of their ordinary life? And these were not the crime of individuals, but of *society* as a whole. There was no punishment for them; no law could reach them; the government itself was corrupt. Their very religion was corruption itself; their worship was lust and debauchery. All was one mass of reeking pollution. ... Only the judgments of God could purge the guilty land.”<sup>9</sup>

Hastings also discusses the horrors found in the last chapters of Judges, the vast difference between slavery among the Israelites and that of other countries, the Cities of Refuge, and the laws preventing robbing the poor and establishing great conglomerates.

Does the Bible itself give us a clear explanation of why such things as happened to the Amalekites and the Midianites were fully justified? Yes. Read the closing verses of Leviticus 18, where God warns his own people that if they followed the immoral ways of the Canaanites, they themselves would endure a similar fate (the warning follows a list of the horrible obscenities practiced by the Canaanites):

“Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before

you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you” (Lev. 18:24-28, NIV).

### Divine Holiness

Clearly God is no respecter of persons, and what we call his “wrath” is merely the reaction of divine holiness against all that is evil and destructive.

Is the contention of Miles that there is a gradual evolution of goodness in the Old Testament God to be taken seriously? I have just completed a six-year study of the Old Testament preparatory for preaching from Genesis to Malachi. I wonder if Miles has ever read Hosea or Jonah. These books show a concern both for God’s own sinning people and the immoral heathen that can make the careful reader weep. But even in the Bible’s opening books, there are pictures of God that fulfil any Christian standard. For example, read Ex. 34:5-7 after considering Spurgeon’s comment on Gen. 3:8:

“But now, the Lord himself comes forth to Adam, and note how he comes. He comes *walking*. He was in no haste to smite the offender, not flying upon wings of wind, not hurrying with his fiery sword unsheathed, but *walking* in the garden. “In the cool of the day”—not in the dead of night, when the natural glooms of darkness might have increased the terrors of the criminal; not in the heat of the day, lest he should imagine that God came in the heat of passion; not in the early morning, as if in haste to slay, but at the close of the day, for God is long-suffering, slow to anger, and of great mercy; but in the cool of the evening, when the sun was setting upon Eden’s last day of glory, when the dews began to weep for man’s misery, when the gentle wind with breath of mercy breathed upon the hot cheek of fear, when earth was silent that man might meditate, and when heaven was lighting her evening lamps, that man might have hope in darkness: then, and not till then, forth came the offended Father.”<sup>10</sup>

### God of the Old and the New

When we remember that the Jehovah (Yahweh) of the Old Testament is the Jesus of the New, we will avoid the error of making one cruel and the other kind. It was through the Son that the Father communicated his will prior to, as well as after, the Incarnation.

Let us now get down to specific cases. Why were the Canaanites, the Midianites, and the Amalekites wiped out? And why did God choose to let Israel be the executioner rather than famine or plague or earthquake?

There are no novel answers to these questions. For centuries the same explanation has been given, and that explanation is only an enlargement of Leviticus 18. Take, for example, the comments of Thomas Scott, the Anglican preacher converted to the gospel



by John Newton. And see the more recent comments by Jamison, Faussett, and Brown; Christopher Wordsworth; Alveh Hovey; and R. Tuck—all written well over a century ago.

On 1 Sam. 15:3, Scott wrote: “The Amalekites had long before been condemned, but the nation had been spared, till it had filled up the measure of its iniquities. The righteous Lord certainly did no injustice to individuals; and the example was of a salutary tendency, to deter others in future ages from ‘meddling to their own hurt’ with the servants of the living God.”<sup>11</sup>

### Guilty Punished

Scott comments on Num. 31:14-18 as follows: “The sword of war should spare women and children, as incapable of resisting; but the sword of justice knows no distinction, except that of guilty or not guilty, and more or less guilty. This was the execution of a righteous sentence upon a guilty nation, in which the women were the principal criminals; and perhaps particular instructions had been given on this head: therefore Moses was angry, when he found that the women had been spared. If those concerned in the detestable project of Balaam had been preserved as captives, they would have been a constant temptation to the people and they could not be known from the rest except by miracle. Orders were therefore given to put all the women to death, and the male children, and only to spare the female children who could not

## It will stop at nothing to deny the presence of the supernatural.

be supposed to have been culpable; and who, being brought up among the Israelites, would not tempt them to idolatry. It has been groundlessly asserted that Moses authorized the Israelites to make concubines of the whole number of female children, or even promiscuously to debauch them; and a formidable objection against his writings have been grounded on this strange supposition. But the whole tenor of the law and especially a statute hereafter to be considered proves the contrary (Deut. 21:10-14). They were merely permitted to possess them as female slaves; while all the laws concerning marriage and concubinage, and against fornication and whoredom, were in full force, in this, as well as in other cases. But what shall we say of the execution of all the male infants who could not personally be guilty in this matter? ... Had they lived, they might have conspired to avenge the death of their parents on Israel: and the example was thus rendered more tremendous, warning parents not to imitate the guilt of the Midianites, lest they should involve their beloved offspring in destruction. ... It should also be remembered that children are

constantly involved in the desolations occasioned by famines, pestilences and earthquakes.”<sup>12</sup>

More recently we have contemporaries like Derek Kidner and others who have written similarly on these themes. See, for example, *The Hard Sayings of the Bible* by Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, and Brauch.

### When Secularism Rules

Secularism rules modern society and much of religion. It will stop at nothing to deny the presence of the supernatural. Thus men wrest the Scriptures and thereby destroy the branch of hope and faith on which all are poised, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

Every paragraph of Christ's teachings has its seed in the Old Testament. He came to testify to a Truth already existing (see John 18:37) and affirmed that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35, NIV). He did not deny the presence of parable, metaphor, anthropomorphisms, and other literary forms in the Old Testament, but he categorically denied any theory that refused to see in the canonical writers God's inspired penmen.

Adolph Saphir makes this clear: “These direct references to Moses and the prophets—so numerous, so striking, so solemn, and so comprehensive—must be taken in connection with the more concealed allusions to Scripture thoughts and teaching, with which Christ's discourses are replete. In his sermon on the mount, in the discourses recorded in the Gospel of John, in his conversations with his disciples, in the parables, there is scarcely a thought which is not in some manner connected with the Scripture. All Christ's thoughts and expressions have been moulded in that wonderful school of the testimony which God had given to his chosen people.”<sup>13</sup>

The question put by Abraham in Gen. 18:25 (NIV): “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” is answered correctly by all who have come to know Christ and him crucified. Only those who have gladly chosen to do the will of God can discover the truth on issues of moral debate. See John 7:17. **AT**

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<sup>1</sup> *Walking Away From Faith: Unravelling the Mystery of Belief and Unbelief*, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed study of Jack Miles' work, look up the review by CRI (The Christian Research Institute) on the Internet. For this article, I touch only upon the supposed carelessness regarding morality by the God of the Old Testament.

<sup>3</sup> *The Problem of Evil*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> H.L. Hastings, *Will the Old Book Stand?*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Scott, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (see 1 Sam. 15:3).

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, (see Num. 31:14-18).

<sup>13</sup> Adolph Saphir, *Christ and the Scriptures*, p. 10.