

# Scriptural Horror and the Divine Will

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SINCE THE APPEARANCE OF HIGHER BIBLICAL CRITICISM, scholars have attempted to examine the Christian canon using contemporary standards of ethical analysis. From Russell to Bultmann, the critics have sought to make sense of the scriptural reports which run counter to modern moral sensibilities (Bretall 1972; Bultmann 1962; Foote and Ball 1926; Hinton 1961; Russell 1957).

Critics have divided into two opposing camps. On one side are those who regard canonized writings as historical drama, the experiences of nomadic societies reacting to political and social threats (Rogers 1969). This view de-emphasizes the divine as an important source of the canon because cruelty and injustice seemed so integral to the Judeo-Christian tradition. On the other side are Christian apologists who maintain that the canon is an inerrant and defensible description of the divine nature and will. This view, however, requires explaining why God allows and sometimes requires atrocities. No commentary, however, attempts to reconcile the critics' insight and moral outrage with the apologists' vision of the holy and its importance in human affairs.

Is there an unbridgeable gap between secular biblical criticism and sectarian efforts to wrap all scripture in holy cloth? Can troublesome canon be adequately dealt with without jettisoning all theological beliefs? An analysis of the *ideas* about God and about humanity might help reconcile the differences between contemporary ethical standards and the troubling messages and events in scripture.

A reconciliation would not harm religious sentiment and meaning. The idea of moral progress and the rejection of barbaric beliefs is not inimical to the pursuit of religious life. An unfolding ethical dimension of human history neatly reconciles the idea of God's purpose for humanity while preserving the

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moral independence and identity of human beings. Unfortunately, the atrocities of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao do little to support the liberal view of human ethical progress.

Still, we can examine religious literature and beliefs to see if they portray standards worthy of enlightened devotion. Can God and divine commands, as portrayed in religious canon, serve as moral examples? This paper will explore Mormonism's place in this dispute and outline a set of core ethical paradigms upon which a faithful Mormon might judge horrific canon.

LDS theology argues for an unfolding and eclectic view of truth, evident in Joseph Smith's King Follett discourse (Smith 1954, 346-47), thus providing fertile ground for examination and reform. This foundation, while providing opportunity for analysis and correction, is not often used (Bennion 1981, 58), perhaps because so few are accustomed to historical and contextual analysis. In the place of ethical analysis, Mormons have seemingly embraced, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, virtually every word of Mormon canon. The lack of critical analysis might be the reluctance of an obedient people to critique the messages and documents of their leaders. However, despite the strong message, from some quarters, to uncritically accept official Church statements, there have been some profound countervailing influences.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, believing that significant elements of Mormon scripture have been revealed quite recently by God, Mormons commonly treat their canon as inviolate, and the utterances of their leaders, past and present, as inerrant (Benson 1980, 2, 13-15; Packer 1982). A systematic critique of Mormon scripture, compared to officially distributed interpretations of scripture, may never occur in the atmosphere generated by Elders Bruce R. McConkie and Boyd K. Packer (1982). In his letter to Eugene England, McConkie declared:

It is my province to teach to the Church what the doctrine is. It is your province to echo what I say or to remain silent. You do not have a divine commission to correct me or any of the Brethren. The Lord does not operate that way. If I lead the Church astray, that is my responsibility, but the fact still remains that I am the one appointed with all the rest involved so to do. . . .

I advise you to take my counsel on the matters here involved. If I err, that is my problem; but in your case if you single out some of these things and make them the center of your philosophy, and end up being wrong, you will lose your soul (1981, 8-9).

If any doubts arise over the accounts presented by their canon, Mormons either avoid the matter or refer to Joseph Smith's caution about the checkered history of biblical translation. Probably a more common reason for the absence

<sup>1</sup> In 1945, President George Albert Smith strongly criticized the *Improvement Era* ward teachers' instruction concerning unquestioning obedience to the living prophet (reprinted in *DIALOGUE* 19 [Spring 1986]: 38-39). President David O. McKay's open-mindedness about the evolution controversy (Poll 1986) and Sterling McMurrin's unorthodoxy (Ostler 1984, 18) have been well documented. We can also note Harold B. Lee's reorganization of the Historical Department under Leonard J. Arrington and the fact that controversial historian D. Michael Quinn still collects a paycheck from BYU. See also Hugh B. Brown, "An Eternal Quest: Freedom of the Mind," reprinted in *DIALOGUE* 17 (Spring 1984): 77-83.

of ethical criticism is that relatively few Latter-day Saints have thought seriously about the inconsistent moral positions presented in their scripture.

When Mormons sidestep ethical analysis of their scripture and the official literature which interprets it, they ignore the strong — if unused — signals sent by the unique elements of their theology. By so acting, Mormons also inherently assert that revelation is little more than a mechanistic, if holy, process whereby God delivers, in secular terms, a floppy disk containing instructions in colloquial English.

Contemporary Mormon interpretive literature continually emphasizes the horrific stories as support for the current, ascendant emphasis on authority and the moral "otherness" of God. Mormons devote much time to talking, approvingly, about the atrocities found in scripture and little time examining whether these atrocities are morally defensible, especially when they purport to demonstrate and reflect the divine will. An inquiry into the current Mormon views of God's moral character as portrayed in scripture might help us understand why morally repugnant narratives enjoy official sanction. Some examples are the near-sacrifice of Isaac, the execution by fire of Alma and Amulek's converts, and the conquest of Canaan. Each of these stories moves beyond a mere *description* of events and purports to demonstrate the divine will.

The story of Abraham and Isaac, found in Genesis 22:1–17, tells of Isaac, a beloved child conceived late in his parents' life. As Abraham rejoiced in his son, the Lord instructed him to offer up his child as "a burnt offering." According to the scriptures, Abraham did not question God's instruction nor ask why God was requiring behavior which closely resembled that of the priests of the heathen god Baal. Isaac, bearing wood for the sacrifice on his back, climbed the hill to Moriah with his father. Abraham built an altar, laid the wood on it, bound Isaac, and laid him on the altar. Only when Abraham had a knife drawn to slay Isaac did God stay his hand, apparently satisfied with the expression of obedience and devotion.

Mormon interpretative literature regarding this reported event is rich in comment. While there is ample evidence for the position of this paper in conference addresses, articles in official Church magazines, and the like, this paper focuses on statements and outlines prepared by the Church for Sunday School and seminary classes, where we find the plainest efforts to communicate the central position on this issue (among others) to the young. Most of the supportive commentary published since 1965 compares the sacrifice of Isaac with the sacrifice of Christ, echoing the inference found in Genesis 22:16. So strong are the perceived parallels that one seminary teacher's manual declares: "Our Savior, like Isaac, was also an 'only begotten Son.' A miracle surrounded His birth. He came to fulfill a great promise. He also climbed a mountaintop where a great sacrifice was to be made. But rather than the bundle of wood, He carried a cross" (CES 1975, p. R8–6). Furthermore, a text for college students includes the following:

When they arrived at Moriah, the Genesis account says, "Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son" (Genesis 22:6). The Joseph Smith Translation, however, reads, "laid it upon his back" (JST, Genesis 22:7). Some have

seen in this action a similarity to Christ's carrying of the cross upon his shoulders on the way to his crucifixion (see Clarke, *Bible Commentary*, 1:139; John 19:17; cited in CES 1980-81, 77).

However, the "parallels" are, at best, strained and excessive. First, though modern Mormon writers want to increase Isaac's age to that of Christ, there is little evidence to support such a move. It is unclear how the ascending age of Isaac relieves this story of its abhorrent message. And Elder Spencer W. Kimball, in 1942, clearly referred to Isaac as Abraham's "young son" (CR, Oct. 1952, p. 48). Second, Isaac lived because of God's intervention, while Christ died because neither God nor man could interfere with that final sacrifice. Third, Isaac would have died at the hands of his mortal father as directed by God, while Christ died at the hands of the Romans who acted in concert with the Sanhedrin. Contemporary attempts to equate Isaac's proposed sacrifice with Christ's are without foundation and blasphemous.

The Old Testament Seminary Teacher's Manual states, as one of the primary goals of the lesson on Abraham: "We can learn a great lesson from Abraham's experience: We can learn to make the gospel *first* and *foremost* in our lives, always remembering that the prime example of total dedication has been given by our Father in heaven and his Son Jesus Christ" (CES 1975, p. R8-3). The guide goes on to counsel:

Ask the students, What can we learn from this incident in Abraham's life to make our own lives better? (We can acquire an increased understanding and appreciation for our Father in heaven and Jesus Christ when we realize what they went through for our benefit. We can see the importance of making obedience to the counsel of our Father in heaven the most important thing in our lives.) (p. R8-3)

The 1983 Seminary Teacher's Outline for the Old Testament, in discussing the Abraham and Isaac story, contains a quote from a 1978 General Conference address by Elder Robert E. Wells. He argues that "One of the principal purposes of this life is to find out if the Lord can *trust* us. . . . We are destined to be tried, tested and proven during our sojourn on earth to see if we are trustworthy" (CES 1983, 55). By its use of Elder Wells's Conference remarks, the outline editors suggest that God would create circumstances to test the faith of mortals. Elder Wells continues: "The Prophet Joseph Smith indicated that to attain the highest blessings of this life, we will first be tested and proved thoroughly until the Lord is certain that he can trust us in all things, regardless of the personal hazard or sacrifice involved" (p. 55).

An article by Lowell Jackson that first appeared in the December 1965 *Instructor* is favorably quoted in the 1975 Seminary Teachers Manual: "Why is there so much loneliness and unhappiness in this world? Could this be because we disobey God, we fail his tests, we think too much is expected of us? Let us keep in mind the sacrifice Abraham was willing to make. Or in our moments of trial, let us recall the sacrifice of our Savior and draw courage from Him. Truly, these are great lessons" (CES 1975, p. R6-8).

The similitude of Isaac's sacrifice to Christ's and the importance of unquestioning obedience monopolize the interpretive writings: there is no com-

ment upon the propriety of Abraham's obedience nor upon why God asked a faithful servant to perform so wrenching an act if there was no Divine intention to permit the human sacrifice to occur. A student manual for Institute classes refused to refer to the potential death of Isaac as the killing of a child, but rather used the following euphemistic language: "The willingness of Abraham to give up something as dear as Isaac sharply contrasts with the young ruler who asked the Savior what he must do to be saved. When told he should sell all of his possessions and follow the Master, 'he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions' (Matthew 19:22)" (CES 1980-81, 78). The implication is that giving up riches is the emotional and moral equivalent of killing one's son!

The lesson goes on to quote from a 1952 General Conference address by Elder Spencer W. Kimball which attempts to reconcile the moral contradictions of the Abraham/Isaac story, namely, the conflict between the law of obedience and the law prohibiting murder: "He believed God. His undaunted faith carried him with breaking heart toward the land of Moriah with this young son who little suspected the agonies through which his father must have been passing" (p. 78). In other words, Abraham's unqualified faith in and obedience to God — disregarding what God commands or the content of moral laws — is the preeminent lesson to be learned by faithful saints.

A curious strain in Mormonism appears to argue for a God who, to strengthen humanity, arranges events which inflict great pain and suffering, not only on the wicked, but especially on the faithful (D&C 101:4-57). If any would rebel against such a God or would reject the instructions of such a God, they are denied final grace and rest (D&C 101:35-38 and 122:5-9).

The 1980-81 Old Testament Student Manual gives a very harsh picture of the sacrifices that God expects of believers by its reference to the exodus of the Saints from Missouri:

The Saints in Jackson County had been driven out of their homes into the bitter winter of Missouri. Their suffering was intense and lives were even lost. At that time the Lord spoke to the Saints through Joseph Smith and said: "Therefore, they must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son. For all those who will not endure chastening, but deny me, cannot be sanctified (D&C 101:4-5)" (CES 1980-81, 79).

The student is thereby instructed that God, in order to test those who would be members of his Church, may command and *cause* severe physical deprivation or the death of an innocent child and condemn those who would bridle against such abuses.

This lesson quotes with favor from the *Lectures on Faith*, traditionally viewed as prepared by Joseph Smith: "Let us here observe, that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation" (CES 1980-81, 80). No moral parameters are established for this injunction. The sacrifice might mean giving up some material possession, it might mean giving up some person dear to you by your act of sacrificing *them*, or it might mean giving up a moral belief which would otherwise direct a person not to harm another. Apparently, a

"true" religion might compel a faithful believer to give up his or her own life; it might even require a Church member to take the life of another. The unidentified authors of this manual declare that "any reluctance to sacrifice whatever God requires will . . . lessen our ability to have faith in God" (CES 1980-81, 80). Again, no analysis of the moral status of such commanded acts of God accompanies such injunctions; rather, the presumed fact of the commandment is taken to dissolve all possible objections.

Joseph Smith's modern versions of the Abrahamic tests can be understood as a technique to make the needs of the group supreme over the needs of the individual. This provides the setting for an authoritarian organization to direct any act or accomplish any need, however unusual, especially when the authority figure asserts that he is acting with God's approval or by his command.

The question of whether a revelation can be a defense against a charge of murder was a key issue in the 1985 trials of Ron and Dan Lafferty in the Fourth District Court, Provo, Utah. The Lafferty brothers were charged with the murder of their sister-in-law, Brenda Lafferty, and her infant daughter. When the Laffertys were arrested, a document found in Ron's shirt pocket read:

Thus sayeth the Lord unto my servants the prophets. It is my will and commandment that ye remove the following individuals in order that my work might go forward, for they have truly become obstacles in my path and I will not allow my work to be stopped. First thy brother's wife Brenda and her baby, then Chloe Low, and then Richard Stowe. And it is my will that they be removed in rapid succession and that an example be made of them in order that others might see the fate of those who fight against the true saints of God (*Deseret News*, 1 May 1985, p. B-1).

Lafferty used the defense of revelation in explaining his actions. One juror in the Lafferty trial refused to condemn the defendant to death because of her belief that God *could have* directed Lafferty to act as he did. In describing the verdict of the jury in Dan Lafferty's trial, an unnamed juror announced a new jurisprudential theory: "There were some who felt the mitigating circumstances regarding his belief in prophecy, revelation, and the will of God, versus whether he was mentally ill, outweighed the aggravating circumstances" (*Deseret News*, 12 Jan. 1985, pp. A-3, 4). Nevertheless, the jury recommended the death penalty for Ron Lafferty, after just two hours of deliberation. However, Dan Lafferty, also convicted of first-degree murder, was sentenced to two life sentences.

One striking feature of these cases is that when someone, especially a child, is murdered on the presumed instruction of God, no one admires the "obedient" individual's strength as we are obviously supposed to admire Abraham. Rather, the more obvious assumption, as the jury found out, is that the defendants were mentally ill but nevertheless suitable for punishment. In fact, a key issue in the defense was whether the Laffertys were mentally competent to stand trial.

The authors of the 1975 Teacher's Manual for the Old Testament suggests:

Think for a minute of the joy and happiness that must have been experienced by Abraham and his son, Isaac, as Isaac was being untied and taken from the sacrificial



altar: joy they never could have had without the pain and sorrow that preceded it. The joy was not the result of the Lord's releasing them from the responsibility of sacrificing Isaac; for if the knife had fallen, that same joy would have come to them when they had met later in the celestial kingdom of God" (CES 1975, p. 8-5).

The authors here seem to argue that Abraham's joy came *not* from the preservation of his son's life, but from the successful trial of obedience. The lesson continues: "If the knife had fallen, the *same* joy would have come to them when they met later in the celestial kingdom of God" (p. R8-5; italics added). This perspective dispatches the traditional defense that God would really not have permitted the child's death.

The second story is found in the Book of Mormon in Alma 14:1-13. Alma and Amulek, Alma's first convert in the city of Ammonihah, are imprisoned, then forced to watch as their male converts are cast out and stoned while the women, children, and scriptures are "cast into the fire" (Alma 14:8).

And when Amulek saw the pains of the women and children who were consuming in the fire, he also was pained; and he said unto Alma: How can we witness this awful scene? Therefore let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of God which is in us, and save them from the flames.

But Alma said unto him: the Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day (Alma 14:10-11).

This passage makes a theological statement: God apparently will not determine sin by examining the intent or actions of the transgressor, a contradiction of the teachings of Jesus when he declared that a complete morality is dependent upon intention: "You have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh upon a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already *in his heart*" (Matthew 5:27-29; italics added). Instead, the Book of Mormon and contemporary interpretive writings declare that the wicked can be adequately punished only if the innocent are allowed to suffer, even though the innocent could have apparently been spared the suffering, since God's punishment of the guilty is made more certain once the innocent are cruelly tortured.

Several important commentaries of this story have been written, most within the last twenty years. I found only one discussion of the incident before 1965; no Priesthood, Sunday School, or Institute of Religion manual mentions it before 1965. The 1979-80 LDS Institute Student Manual on the Book of Mormon does not address the ethical issue of God allowing the mortal death of the innocent to secure the eternal condemnation of the guilty. Instead, it quotes President Kimball:

Now, we may find many people critical when a righteous person is killed, a young father or mother is taken from a family, or when violent deaths occur. . . . But if all the sick were healed, if all the righteous were protected and the wicked destroyed, the

whole program of the Father would be annulled and the basic principle of the Gospel, free agency, would be ended (CES 1979, 239).

This quote is interesting in the context of this discussion. The manual's authors, by applying President Kimball's story in this context, seem to equate two unlike cases; the Alma 14 story is not the case of a tragic accident or a priesthood request being denied but is, rather, a case where a prophet with the power to save innocent lives is prevented from doing so by God, so that those who caused pain and suffering could be punished.<sup>2</sup>

The 1984 Teacher's Supplement to the Gospel Doctrine manual on the Book of Mormon, which also comments on this story, tells us, "We should also recognize that following their brief suffering, those faithful martyrs were brought into the peaceful presence of the Lord" (CES 1984, 78). Therefore, what apparently matters is not the cruelty of deaths that could have been prevented but that God comforts those in heaven whose deaths served the purpose of allowing him to condemn the guilty. There is no discussion over the manner in which the innocent leave this world, as it is their deaths themselves which apparently serve God's purposes in punishing the wicked. Is the condemnation of the sinful more pronounced if the innocent are incinerated rather than killed, for example, by lethal injection? Or can the wicked be adequately judged and punished only if their victims are fed to the flames?

Prior to 1965, the only officially referenced commentary on the matter of innocent death focused on death in war, but it did not deal with the morality of God permitting such an event. In the 1942 April General Conference, David O. McKay, second counselor to President Heber J. Grant, discussed World War II and observed:

On this Easter Day, the Risen Christ beholds in the world not peace, but *war*. . . . War originates in the hearts of men who seek to despoil, to conquer, or to destroy other individuals or groups of individuals . . . . War is rebellious action against the moral order . . . . Even though we sense the hellish origin of war . . . we find ourselves as a body committed to combat this evil thing. . . . One purpose of emphasizing this theme is to give encouragement to young men now engaged in armed conflict and to reassure them that they are fighting for an eternal principle fundamental to the peace and progress of mankind" (CR 1942, 70-74).

Nowhere did President McKay claim that the deaths of the soldiers were anything but an unavoidable consequence of the effort to suppress the tyrants who brought on World War II. McKay could have argued that the deaths of the soldiers and the innocent victims sealed the judgement against those who caused

<sup>2</sup> Alma 60:13 says: "For the Lord suffereth the righteous to be slain that his justice and judgment may come upon the wicked; therefore ye need not suppose that the righteous are lost because they are slain; but behold, they do enter into the rest of the Lord their God." Contrast this position with 1 Nephi 4:13: "Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief." How can God consistently order the death of Laban because of his own wickedness, yet require the death of the innocent to condemn the wicked? On the basis of the analysis set out in 1 Nephi 4:13, couldn't the people of Ammonihah have been destroyed so that the innocent could have lived? Theologically, are we judged only on our acts or also on our thoughts and intentions?



the war. Instead, by failing to invoke the "lesson" of Alma 14, he implies that God's judgment of the wicked is independent of the death of any person. There are parallels between Alma 14 and the modern horrors of the Jewish and other, more recent, holocausts. In these instances, innocent people died horrible deaths because of their religions or religious/ethnic identity. The post-1965 manuals do not refer to such holocausts in their commentaries on Alma 14, thus avoiding "justifying" the deaths of 6 million Jews by the eternal condemnation of their executioners.

My third example is really a compilation of other horror stories, some scriptural. In Numbers 31, Moses is angry when his army brings back women and children captured from the destruction of the Midianites:

And Moses said unto them, Have ye saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord.

Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him.

But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves (vv. 15-18).

The scorched-earth policies of the conquest of Canaan are justified in Joshua 11:20: "For it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that he might destroy them utterly, and that they might have no favour, but that he might destroy them, as the Lord commanded Moses." Are we to believe that if an enemy is not awful enough on their own terms to justify extinction, God will make them stubborn so that the chosen people can slaughter them guilt-free? Though Joseph Smith corrected the moral absurdity of this scripture, we continue to use the King James Old Testament, uncorrected and unrefuted.

In 2 Samuel 24:16, the Lord orders a pestilence upon the land of Israel because David sinned in numbering his soldiers. Seventy thousand die before the Lord halts the bacterial warfare of his destroying angel. David, who previously pled for forgiveness before the slaughter, asked why God punished innocent people for a sin that was his alone. The scriptures record no answer, but it is a question we, too, should ask.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Smith, in the context of justifying polygamy, stated in 1842: "Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reasons thereof till long after the events transpire" (HC 5:134-36). This concept that ethical rightness is derived solely from divine command is at odds with the competing Mormon idea that God would not command anything

<sup>3</sup> See also: Gen. 6:5, 7, 17, 17:14; Ex. 12:29, 30, 21:20, 21, 22:18-19, 31:14-15; Lev. 20:18, 21:18-21; Num. 15:32-36, 21:5-6; Deut. 13:6-10, 20:16-17, 21:10-14, 20-21, 23:2; Judg. 11:29-31; 1 Sam. 6:19; 2 Sam. 6:6-7; Ezra 10:2, 3; Isa. 14:21; Lam. 2:21, 3:10-11; Ezek. 14:9; Hosea 13:7-8; Nahum 1:2-6; Matt. 8:22, 25:41, 46; Rom. 9:16, 18, 21-22; 2 Thess. 1:7-9; Rev. 21:8.

that is not good. However, in April 1844, Joseph delivered the King Follett discourse in which he stated:

How consoling to the mourners when they are called to part with a husband, wife, father, mother, child, or dear relative, to know that, although the earthly tabernacle is laid down and dissolved, they shall rise again to dwell in everlasting burnings in immortal glory, not to sorrow, suffer, or die any more; but they shall be heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. What is it? To inherit the same power, the same glory and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a God, and ascend the throne of eternal power, the same as those who have gone before. What did Jesus do? Why; I do the things I saw my Father do when worlds came rolling into existence. My Father worked out his kingdom with fear and trembling, and *I must do the same*" (Smith 1954, 347; italics added).

The implication from this sermon is that the actions enjoined are not good simply because God commands them, but that God and humanity are both bound to obey common moral standards derived from pre-existent, naturally extant laws. The correct interpretation of these eternal laws furthers the long-term interests of both mortals and deity. From this position, then, it would follow that invoking hidden divine agendas would be unacceptable to excuse otherwise inexplicable acts of cruelty or barbarism.

Oddly, though, Mormons almost never object to stories where cruelty seems to be divinely accepted or even enjoined. There are few anguished cries over the Sunday School or seminary lessons so blandly advanced. Few parents, holding their babies, protest a Sunday School lesson that promotes cruelty as faithfulness or discuss the propriety of teaching mindless zeal to their children. Latter-day Saints apparently accept the view that God tests faithfulness and moral quality of soul by commanding illegal and barbaric actions. How do we reconcile the image of a loving Christ with the atrocities committed by Jehovah?

It seems that we have become morally impotent when confronted by biblical atrocities, by insisting that they are both literally true and a factual representation of God's will. This approach seduces our ethical sensibilities. We fear a God whose standards bear no apparent relationship to the best of mortal moral beliefs. Therefore, we have tolerated the construction of an ideology which has, at its base, the belief that God may command any activity and thereby determine its morality. We comfortably conclude that obedience is the fundamental, perhaps exclusive, issue upon which faithfulness is evaluated. Consequently, our convictions have been stripped of moral content, and our personal beliefs ultimately yield to any injunction that is propounded in the name of God. The moral nihilism which unconsciously suffuses contemporary Mormonism cauterizes our moral intuition, leaving us incapable of moral outrage.

The absence of protest and scriptural analysis suggests that the troubling scriptures enjoy more than tacit approval among many Mormons. Every element of canon is defended upon the twin grounds that obedience is our pre-eminent duty and that God operates upon indecipherable moral standards. These arguments assault the faithfulness of anyone who would venture to analyze scripture or who would seek to understand the ethical standards of God. Elder Mark E. Petersen wrote that the sacrifice of Isaac was "one of the

greatest examples of complete faith we know about, and should be a constant inspiration to us" (1979, 120). Elder Petersen does not explain why the best test of faith is the believer's willingness to commit atrocities in the name of God. It would be refreshing to hear test-of-faith stories of those who resign a lucrative legal career or a promising medical practice to serve in the slums of Calcutta with Mother Teresa or, closer to home, to feed the poor in Lowell Bennion's soup kitchen. Instead, when modern persons act consistently with ancient standards while invoking God's will, we primly respond that God didn't, for unknow reasons, order atrocities this time. Either God's moral standards bear no relationship to ours, or contemporary Mormon commentary seems curiously unconnected to moral moorings.

The conflict between ordinary ethical sentiments and the formal ecclesiastical beliefs exists because we have not yet examined the implications of our scripture. Our inability to recognize moral issues and our insistence on compartmentalizing competing ethical standards has led us to create moral epicycles which account for everything, but which fail to dispense moral guidance. Not only have we failed to reject the horrific scriptures, we have actively worked to incorporate them more centrally in our belief system. We have refused to confront the messages our beliefs transmit about ourselves.

Are we comfortable with a God who would not only endorse but command the slaughter of the innocent? Would we set aside our ascending moral standards to obey a God to whom rigid obedience, in the service of cruelty, is said to be preeminent over every moral objection? Plainly, we need to examine the relationship between our theology and our ethics and develop a standard of behavior by which scripture may also be evaluated.

I would propose that we divorce ethical beliefs from theological foundations. By excising theological beliefs from behavioral standards, we can then analyze the independent strengths of each. One body of beliefs must not rely on the other for its justification. Creation of an ethical standard should precede the creation of a theology. Only then can we effectively deal with religious beliefs that call for barbaric acts, contrary to our moral code. If any scripture or interpretive commentary embraces barbaric messages for which there is little, if any, ethical defense, then it is not out of line to question that scripture, its alleged message, and the interpretive literature, thereafter dismissing it from the canon of the moral and just if it is found wanting. If we clearly understand the provisions of a systematic ethic, we can return to the theology to see if it helps or hinders our drive to fashion a more humane world.

Thus, fundamental moral standards need not be based on theological beliefs. God must exist as an ethical entity and not as the capricious, *ex nihilo* author of an inconsistent morality, or there is no hope of ever developing a humane ethic. I disagree with Bruce Hafen, then president of Ricks College, who argued that seeming moral ambiguities and ethical confusion might be resolved by remembering that God may act in any manner:

It is possible to encounter some ambiguity even in studying scriptures. Consider, for example, the case of Nephi, who slew Laban in order to obtain the scriptural record. That situation is not free from ambiguity until the reader realizes that God Himself,

who gave the commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill" was also the origin of the instructions to Nephi in that exceptional case (1979, 63).

Thus, to Hafen and others, God may determine the morality of any given event.

Can we identify some guides in developing a holistic theory of ethical beliefs and behavior from which we may then fashion a complementary theology? Let me offer some suggestions for beginning the discussion, recognizing that the following principles are *a priori* assumptions which focus on the legitimate interests of individuals and which do not discuss the legitimate role of groups in promoting benevolence for the reason that groups act in concert with the beliefs of their constituent members.

1. All persons are self-existent, uncreated identities, possessing inherent and inviolate value. They may not be sacrificed (in any sense) for the good of another individual or principle.

2. Values which promote the long-term interests of individuals ought to be identified and protected.

3. Morality prohibits the use of coercion or power except to preserve individual human interests. Power or coercion may never be used when the morally innocent subject of the power is ignorant of that use of power, when the subject does not knowingly consent, or when the subject does not recall that consent.

4. The afterlife and its effects cannot be used to justify actions which offend an informed moral conscience or justify harm to any person who does not give informed, knowledgeable consent while mortal.

5. Kindness, justice, charity, and gentleness are more moral than obedience where obedience is invoked to ensure compliance with cruel beliefs or actions.

From these core beliefs, we might create a unified set of values and behavior which preserves the identity and dignity of individuals against all other influences. This new standard might serve as a test by which we may decide whether an ancient story or a modern injunction preserves or destroys innocence, choice, and individual human well-being against all competing claims, either mortal or divine. Scriptures which promote human happiness and growth should be used with a joyful heart. We should withdraw our support from those which offend our ethical sensibilities. We need to recognize that all scripture has been written by mortals under varying degrees of inspiration, with all kinds of biases: scripture is not a factually objective presentation of any particular set of events. Scripture may be created to enhance power and authority, or it may be written to celebrate human potential. The content and use of our scriptures will depend on the outlines of our beliefs and on how long we can abide the intolerable messages of canon scripture.

Having outlined a new ethic, we can next examine our theological beliefs. The divine-command theory of morality ought to have no place in this theology. Our God could not instruct us to commit barbarous acts or direct us to abandon another to an avoidable, cruel death to preserve some other-world belief or standard, or pit a father's love for his child against his love for/

obedience to an inexplicable, but powerful, deity. The best that the religious tradition says of God might now enjoy our undistracted attention. Our love of Jesus, as he blessed the children in 3 Nephi 19–25, does not have to be compromised by a God who instructs his children to slaughter their fellows. Obert C. Tanner in *Christ's Ideals for Living* (1955) superbly delineates the mercy and humanity of Jesus, as does Lowell Bennion in his *Teachings of the New Testament* (1956). Our theology and ethics must complement each other as they teach us how to improve the human condition.

This is no call to selectively rewrite our scripture. Rather, important lessons may be learned about human history and moral progress when enlightened believers confront and reject the ancient stories of horror. Derivatively, we must reject the favorable treatment too often afforded those portions of canon. While some might be tempted simply to banish the Church writers who glorify horrific scriptures, we need to retain the problem scriptures and their barbaric interpretations as examples of the moral and ethical risks which attend a too-credulous embracing and enhancement of all scripture. Therefore, we may come to realize that Mormon interpretative literature which applauds or justifies scriptural horror is not a faithful depiction of God's character.

Such a position, of course, raises troubling questions of its own. If we assert that there are some lengths to which neither mortals nor God may go, the Church should rid itself of its authoritarian insistence on unquestioned obedience to whatever injunction is uttered through "proper" channels. Can it do so and still enjoy the devotion of its present members? And what are the consequences if it will not or cannot?

We need to take a look at the signals, symbols, and images we transmit among ourselves, to our young, and to the secular world. Bad symbols and stories convey harmful injunctions and standards. Humane stories of kindness, compassion, and uncompromised respect for each individual enhance our concepts of self-worth and transmit to the world that we have a single-hearted devotion to human goodness and progress.

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