

# THE ETHICS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

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## The Objections to Old Testament Ethics

### The Leading Objections to the Ethics of the Old Testament May be Reduced to the Following Seven

*The first objection to the ethics of the Old Testament is that God is represented sometimes in the Old Testament as partial, fickle, hateful, revengeful, and otherwise morally unworthy.*

For example, in Genesis 6:5-7 we read that when God saw the wickedness of man it repented him that he had made him. This, however, is not becoming in God. Indeed, it is impossible. As the Scripture itself says elsewhere, "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and shall he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not make it good?" Again, God's dealings with Pharaoh, as recorded in Exodus 7-14, are inconsistent with any just conception of deity. He is represented as hardening Pharaoh's heart toward Israel and then as overwhelming him in the Red Sea for his treatment of Israel; whereas the Bible itself says in another place, "God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempts he any man" (James 1:13). And it is impossible for us to think of him as punishing anyone for sin which he himself has caused. So too in 1 Kings 22 God is described as deceiving Ahab, and in Ezekiel 14:9 as deceiving false prophets. These are but specimens of many objections of the same kind that might be adduced and that will, doubtless, occur to you. It cannot be denied that they are serious difficulties. This would be so if for no other reason than because unbelievers make great capital out of them. The deist Bolingbroke says: "It is blasphemy to assert that the Old Testament writers were inspired when they attribute such things to divinity as would disgrace humanity." And Col. Ingersoll was continually sneering: "If the best that can be conceived of God is what the Old Testament represents him as being, then there can be no God."

#### Response 1

The representation of God which is largely predominant in the Old Testament is that he is infinitely exalted and absolutely perfect in moral excellence. He is "the LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and who will by no

means clear the guilty" (Exod. 34:6,7).

Even the objector concedes that this is the representation of God characteristic of the Old Testament. His argument is that its God cannot by its own showing be the true God, for he contradicts himself.

Is the objector's course, however, a just one? Because a comparatively few of the Old Testament's representations of God seem to be at variance with the exalted character which it usually ascribes to him, they conclude either that the character as a whole is so inconsistent as to be impossible, or that the predominant representation is false and the exceptional one true. Ought they not rather to infer that if either must be false, it is the exceptional one; and that if the exceptional one fairly admits of two interpretations, then that one which harmonizes with the characteristic representations must be the true one? We have no right to assume that the author is inconsistent. If his statements can be harmonized, we are bound to do so. No one insists more strenuously than does the objector that his own utterances should be treated thus.

## Response 2

To harmonize is possible and usually easy, if we take into account the context (according to our first principle) as well as the contents of each passage, the idioms of language, and the characteristics of the oriental mind. For example, the objectionable expression, "It repented him," in Genesis 6:6 must be interpreted by the explanatory phrase in the context "it grieved him." "This shows," says the excellent commentary of Keil and Delitzsch, "that the repentance of God does not presuppose any variableness in His nature or purpose. In this sense God never repents of anything 'because,' as Calvin has written, 'nothing happens unexpectedly to Him or unforeseen by Him.' The repentance of God is an anthropomorphic expression for the pain of the divine love at the sin of man and signifies that, as Calvin has also added, 'God is hurt no less by the atrocious sins of men than if they pierced His heart with mortal anguish.'"

When "repent," used in connection with God, does indicate change (as in Jonah 3:10), it does not mean a change in God's attributes and character, but only in his manner of treating men. It is not a change of will, but a will to change that is intended. This will to change, moreover, is in this case the expression and the condition of a changeless will in the sense of disposition. Thus, if after their repentance God had willed to treat the Ninevites as He had threatened to treat them before their repentance, this would have proved him mutable. It would have revealed him as displeased at one time with impenitence and at another time with penitence.<sup>1</sup> In this way it appears that in this case, as in many others, the objectors do not know what they are objecting to. Their objection is that when God repents he must be changeable, whereas he would be changeable if in these instances he did not repent.

Again, take the objectionable phrase in Exodus 10:27: "But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's

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<sup>1</sup> Vide, also, Jer. 18:7-10.

heart." This is evidently to be interpreted by the explanatory phrase occurring often in the context, "And Pharaoh hardened his heart." Nor may it be said that there is as much reason why this phrase should be interpreted by the other and objectionable one. The latter is inconsistent with the Old Testament's characteristic representation of God. It should, therefore, as has been already implied, be interpreted by the clearly parallel and explanatory phrase that would remove the inconsistency. Moreover, the idiom of the language shows that, independently of the question of consistency, the interpretation just suggested is the one required. According to the Hebrew idiom, a positive statement is often used as equivalent to the mere negation of its opposite. Thus in the Hebraistic Greek of the New Testament, "hate" in Romans 9:13 ("Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated"), does not mean what we mean by hate, but only the absence of the special love which God feels for those whom, out of his general love for all sinners, he has chosen to be his adopted sons. So in Matthew 10:37, "to hate father and mother" is the same as to love them less in comparison than Christ. In like manner, the meaning of harden is not to soften. When God hardens a man's heart, he simply leaves him alone and lets him do what we are told that Pharaoh did; viz., harden his own heart. "Pharaoh," says Luther in his *Table Talk*, "was hardened because God with his Spirit and grace hindered not his ungodly proceedings, but suffered him to go on and have his way." As Edwards says:

"When God is spoken of as hardening some of the children of men, it is not to be understood that God by any positive efficiency hardens any man's heart. There is no positive act in God, as though he put forth any power to harden the heart. To suppose any such thing would be to make God the immediate author of sin. God is said to harden men in two ways: by withdrawing the powerful influences of his Spirit, without which their hearts will remain hardened and grow harder and harder; in this sense he hardens them as he leaves them to hardness. And again, by ordering those things in his providence which, through the abuse of their corruption, become the occasion of their hardening. Thus God sends his word and ordinances to men which, by their abuse, prove an occasion of their hardening."<sup>2</sup>

Nor may it be objected that this is forcing into phrases the meaning that we wish them to have. If you were living in Turkey, you would not say "I missed my steamer", but you would say "I caused my steamer to run away." Neither would you allow that you were giving an arbitrary meaning of your own to the phrase when you explained it as meaning only that you had missed the steamer. The idiom of the language would lead you to speak as you did, and it is not otherwise when God is said to have hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Once more, take the case in which God is reported to have deceived Ahab (1 Kings 22), or that in which he is represented as deceiving false prophets (Ezek. 14:9). Here the solution of the difficulty is not in a peculiarity of the Hebrew idiom, but in a popular conception. This is that whereby we are commonly conceived as doing what in strictness we only permit. Thus, if a physician has neglected a patient who has died, he is said to have killed him. Yet it is not the physician's neglect but the sick man's disease that is the

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2 *Works*, Vol, IV, p. 548.

efficient cause of his death.

God is represented as having deceived Ahab, for example, only because the popular mind does not discriminate between what one does and what he only permits, and also because it overlooks the great difference between the sovereign God's relation to the permission of evil and ours. It is true that in 1 Kings 22 God seems to do more than simply permit the deception. He is represented as saying in heaven, "Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth Gilead? And one said in this manner and another said in that manner. And there came forth a spirit and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him. And the LORD said, In what way? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And the LORD said, You shall persuade him, and prevail also. Go forth and do so." What else, however, does this mean than that as God's eternal plan contemplates both the existence and the development of evil, so it provides for its own accomplishment by the foreordained permission of evil on the occasions when and in the ways in which evil can by its own working serve the divine purpose? This is not saying that God does evil that good may come. It is saying that he takes evil *already* here--evil actually in manifestation, evil that if left uncontrolled by him would of itself hinder the good--and then so overrules the tendency of this evil that, of itself (though contrary to its own intention), it advances truth and righteousness. What does this indicate but a being as ethical as he is wise and powerful?<sup>3</sup>

Nor may the objector reply that while all this may be so, it is at least immoral for God, in what claims to be his inspired Word, to use these pictorial representations, popular phrases, and anthropomorphic expressions. If so, then it is immoral for the father to speak to his little boy as if he were himself a child, or for the scientist to lecture in the language of the people.

***The second objection to the ethics of the Old Testament is that it often gives the divine endorsement to character not approved by our moral sense.***

Not only is God, as we have seen, represented as immoral himself, but even as distinctly approving what is immoral in others. Abraham is exalted as the most striking example of faith, yet he told lies. David is made the great type of Christ, yet he committed adultery and commanded murder. In general, the Patriarchs were not men whom we would care to invite to our homes. The Judges, so far from ornamenting modern society, would be almost sure to land in the lockup. The Kings were not above the average of oriental monarchs. The Priests were only too evidently tainted with professionalism. The Prophets often exhibit spiritual imperfection. In a word, the men whom God chose to represent him in the sphere of politics and religion were not such as we would suffer to serve us even in menial positions. This is one of the stock infidel objections. Now without pausing to show what could easily be shown--that these charges are almost as false as they are malicious--it will be sufficient to remark by way of refutation as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. V, Sec. 4.

### Response 1

Divine approbation in many of these cases where God's approbation is expressed is explicitly based on and restricted to certain specified and admittedly commendable aspects of these characters. Thus it is as Abraham lives the life of faith that he is "the friend of God." This is made perfectly clear.

### Response 2

In no case is divine approbation extended to those qualities which provoke our moral censure. Abraham is never praised for deceitfulness, nor is Jael praised *by God* for cruelty.

### Response 3

In many cases divine disapprobation is pronounced upon those points of character which we denounce, and the sins are visited with severe judgments. Thus the early deceit of Jacob was avenged through all his later years by the withering influence of the fear of man. The one great crime of David caused the evening of his glorious day to be darkened by the clouds of lust and blood. This connection between sin and suffering in the case even of the most illustrious and most specially chosen servants of God is brought out so clearly, and is traced with such evident purpose, that it seems impossible to escape the conviction that God would thus put himself on record as condemning what is bad in *all*, and specially in all on whom he has set the mark of his peculiar approval.

In a word, the sufficient answer to the objection under consideration is the principle already approved and illustrated; viz., commendation of a character need not imply commendation of every element of that character.

Nowhere, perhaps, is it more necessary to keep this principle in mind than in the interpretation of the passages in which, as it is often alleged, deceit and lying are commended. Such, for example, are Exodus 1:17-21 and Joshua 2:4 and 6:25, the case of the Hebrew midwives and that of Rahab the harlot. Thus God dealt well with the midwives, not because they lied to the Egyptians, but because, though they lied to protect themselves, they feared him rather than the king of Egypt and saved the men-children of the Israelites alive. Indeed, this is expressly affirmed to be the ground of his treatment of them. So, too, Rahab the harlot was spared in the sack of Jericho, not because she lied to her fellow citizens concerning the Hebrew spies, but because, as Hebrews 11 informs us, of her faith in the God of Israel. These and like cases, moreover, point the important and often forgotten truths that no one is so bad that there is not some good in him, and this good ought always to be appreciated even when mixed with the bad.

***A third objection to the ethics of the Old Testament is that it endorses not only characters that we cannot justify, but even expressions of individual feeling toward one's fellows that are offensive to our moral judgments.***

These endorsements appear specially in the "Imprecatory Psalms," some fifty in number. All these, though not nearly to the extent charged, contain sentiments that shock us; and certain of them, as Psalm 35, 59, 109, and 137, we can scarcely bring ourselves to read in private. And we could not, I suppose, and certainly should not read them in public worship without explanation. Nevertheless, most of the difficulty will be removed in their case by the following considerations.

### Response 1

The style of these psalms means much more to us than it did to the authors. "The eastern minstrel employs intense and figurative words for saying what the western logician would put in tame and exact language. The fervid oriental would turn from our modifying phrases with sickness of heart. We shudder at the lofty flights which captivate him. But he and we mean to express the same idea." The occidental philosopher affirms that God exercises benevolence toward good men. Isaiah, however, means only this when he cries out, "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isa. 62:5). In like manner the denunciatory phrases of the Old Testament are far more unqualified than we should select. The Hebrew poet sings, "The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance. He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked." Yet these glowing words would not mean more than the precise terms that we would employ, such as, "Good men will rejoice when they see virtue triumphant, even if its prosperity be attended with the just and needed sufferings of the vicious." Another illustration in point is the last verse of Psalm 137, "Happy shall he be who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock." This expression on the part of the captives in Babylon means something altogether different from the utterly unchristian sense commonly given to it, and that it seems to us to have. Inasmuch as Babylon was on a plain where there were no rocks, the literal meaning cannot be the true one. As Dr. Howard Osgood correctly renders the passages, the sense is, "Blessed shall everyone be whom God shall use to destroy to the uttermost Babylon and her children who chose and followed in her sins."<sup>4</sup>

### Response 2

In the imprecatory psalms, and especially in the objectionable phrases in them, the psalmists identify their enemies with God's enemies. "Do not I hate them, O LORD, who hate you? And am not I grieved with those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies" (Ps. 139:21,22). Their own cause, therefore, the psalmists feel to be God's. Hence, in opposition to themselves they see opposition to him. In this, and not in anything merely personal, do we lay bare the root of their indignation.

Now will it not be much more so in the case of sin against God? How may we remain neutral when, as in this instance, the contest is between our loving Father and gracious Savior on the one hand and his rebellious children on the other?

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<sup>4</sup> *Princeton Theological Review* I (1903), p. 37.

### Response 3

The imprecations in the Psalms rest in general on divine denunciations and predictions with respect to evil. They simply call on God to do in the case of his enemies what he has declared that he will do and what, therefore, ought to be done. It is not a desire for personal vengeance, but a longing for the vindication of the divine justice in the divine way that is expressed. This distinction is most important. The mob that clamors for the murderer--that by torturing him they may wreak their vengeance on him--we cannot condemn too strongly. The mass meeting, however, that passes resolutions calling on the authorities for the strictest enforcement of the laws, we cannot praise too highly. Or shall we temper our praise if, in the course of the resolutions, crime is denounced in the most vigorous language and the infliction of the extreme penalties of the criminal code is most earnestly and even vehemently demanded? We can scarcely insist too strenuously on what we know ought to be done. In like manner, may the imprecatory psalms be fully justified. They simply call on God to do what He has said ought to be done.

### Response 4

Nor is the idea which they thus give of God inconsistent with his character as set forth elsewhere in the Bible. This is true even of God as revealed in Christ. Isaiah predicts him as one "who shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall slay the wicked" (11:4). And when Christ came, he was anything but the synonym of weak gentleness. Indeed, it is precisely from him that the most withering denunciations of wickedness ever uttered proceed. And it is just He who represents Himself as pronouncing at the great day, on those who would seem to have been only negatively rather than positively his enemies, the most terrific sentence ever passed: "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). Nor did this escape the attention of those who knew him best. The imprecatory utterances of the New Testament, though not so numerous, are quite as fearful as those of the Old. "I would that they were even cut off who trouble you," wrote Paul (Gal. 5:12). "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil; the Lord reward him according to his works" (2 Tim. 4:14), he also said. Even the Apostle of love portrays the martyrs as crying with a loud voice and saying: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10). Indeed, the general spirit of the New Testament overawes us by its references to God as a "consuming fire," "into whose hands it is dreadful to fall"; "for if he who despises Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses, of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy who has trodden underfoot the Son of God?" (Heb. 10:28,29). So far, therefore, from these imprecatory psalms putting the Old Testament out of harmony with the New, it would be out of harmony did it not contain the imprecatory psalms or something like them.

Now the New Testament is, as we have seen, characteristically, though not exclusively, the gospel of the grace of God. Divine grace, however, is supported by divine justice, and divine justice prepares for divine grace. Without the latter--grace--God would lack the most glorious trait of his moral character. With the former--justice--the fundamental

attribute of his essential nature would be lacking. In order, therefore, to the truth, both the justice and the grace of God, his wrath against sin and his mercy to sinners, must be emphasized.

***A fourth objection to the ethics of the Old Testament is that, in addition to endorsing (as we have just seen) expressions of individual feeling that offend our moral judgments, it represents God as explicitly requiring in some instances acts condemned by our moral sense.***

For example, Abraham is commanded to sacrifice Issac; Moses to deceive Pharaoh with reference to letting the people go; the people to deceive their Egyptian neighbors by pretending to borrow jewelry from them when they had no intention of returning it. This objection culminates in the charge that God expressly required courses of action toward nations and races, which courses of action are utterly abhorrent to our better feelings. Thus with reference to the Canaanites, the divine command to Israel was: "You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity all your days forever" (Deut. 23:6). Indeed, they were charged to drive them out summarily, to destroy them utterly, "showing no mercy, to save alone nothing that breathed." They were to exterminate absolutely all who stood in the way of their undisputed possession of a land to which they had no claim either in law or equity, at least from the human standpoint.

And this mission Joshua strictly fulfilled. Acting on the command of Moses, which was received from God, he smote all the cities "with the edge of the sword, and utterly destroyed all the souls that were therein; he left none remaining." Moreover, the subsequent neglect to execute this ordinance was named as criminal disobedience to Jehovah, and for it Israel had to pay a terrible penalty.

Nor is the difficulty a sentimental one only. At first sight, it is more perplexing to the intellect than it is distressing to the heart. These wars seem to involve cruelty, and to proceed from and to express a cruel disposition on the part of Israel. They appear also to be unjust. The innocent perish with the guilty, and the command is that it should be so. Respecting Amalek, God told Samuel to "slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass" (1 Sam. 15:3).

### Response 1

In all cases in which God is charged with having commanded lying, etc., a correct exegesis will, it is believed, refute the charge. For example:

The Israelites were not told to *borrow* of the Egyptians on the eve of the exodus, neither did they pretend to borrow. What they did, and what God told them to do, was to *ask*. So the Hebrew verb *sha'al* means; so the LXX *eiteo* signifies, with the added idea of demanding; so is the Vulgate *postulo*; and finally such is now the rendering of our Revised Version. "And it shall come to pass," it reads, "that when you go, you shall not go empty; but every woman shall *ask* of her neighbor, and of her who sojourns in her house, jewels of



silver and jewels of gold, and raiment. And you shall put them upon your sons, and upon your daughters; and you shall spoil the Egyptians."

Nor may it be urged that the request of the Children of Israel would be regarded by the Egyptians as a demand for a loan and that, therefore, deception was really to be practiced, though a lie was not formally to be uttered.

Still less could the Israelites have had merely the thought of borrowing in their mind, seeing that God had said to Moses, "I will give the Israelites favor in the eyes of the Egyptians; and it will come to pass, that when you go out, you shall not go out empty." If, therefore, it is "natural to suppose that these jewels were festal vessels with which the Egyptians furnished the poor Israelites for the intended feast," and even if "the Israelites had their thoughts directed with all seriousness to the feast which they were about to celebrate to Jehovah in the desert," their request to the Egyptians cannot have referred to any borrowing, nor have presupposed any intention to restore what they received on their return. From the very first the Israelites asked without intending to restore, and the Egyptians granted their request without any hope of receiving back because God had made their hearts favorably disposed to the Israelites.<sup>5</sup>

Nor, I should add, may the morality of their thus despoiling their oppressors be questioned. It was done by the command of God; and he whose "are the silver and the gold and the cattle on a thousand hills" has the right to dispose of them, consistently with his own absolutely holy nature, to whomsoever he will.

Nor would it be difficult to discern a righteous reason for the exercise of this right in this particular case. It was but just that the nation which had brought the people of God into bondage should be required to help them on the occasion of their exodus, that thus the wrath of man should be made to advance the kingdom of the Most High.

Equally susceptible of vindication is the petition of Moses to Pharaoh that the people be allowed to go into the wilderness to sacrifice. This did not involve deception. God did not mean that the people should get permission to go away to sacrifice and then should avail themselves of the opportunity to escape. On the contrary, he told them to seek permission to sacrifice because, as he himself said, he was sure "that the king of Egypt would not let them go, no, not by a mighty hand." Indeed, so far from God's course being the tricky one that many have tried to make it out to be, it was prompted by both justice and mercy. Mercy disposed him to cause the favor asked of Pharaoh in the first instance to be so moderate that he could easily have granted it had he chosen to do so, and thus have disciplined himself to accede to the request for the release of the whole nation--a request which, if made at first, would have been too much for him. On the other hand, the purpose to manifest his justice disposed God to cause the favor asked of Pharaoh to be so reasonable that his obduracy might appear so much the more glaring, and might have no

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<sup>5</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, Vol. I, p. 446.

excuse in the greatness of the requirement. In short, God's foreknowledge resolves the difficulty that we are considering. The whole narrative is based on it. Moses was directed to make his request with the divine assurance that it would not be granted. He was aware from the first that it was designed to furnish a just occasion for the plagues, "the mighty hand" by which at last they were to be delivered.

## Response 2

The ethical difficulty presented by the wars of extermination is a more comprehensive, if not more serious, one. It proceeds not only from the acts of the Children of Israel as a nation commissioned by God to drive out and destroy the original inhabitants of the land of promise, but also all acts of individuals in more or less conscious furtherance of the divinely revealed policy of extermination, as, for example, the killing of Sisera by Jael.

The solution of this difficulty requires to us consider:

(1) The intrinsic rightfulness of God's policy of extermination. This may be vindicated on the following grounds:

(a) God, because God, has the right to destroy both nations and individuals; and it is a right which he is constantly exercising. As God, he is the author of life and of death. Even the king of Israel asked, "Am I God, to kill and to make alive?" (2 Kings 5:7). As life is an absolutely free gift from him, it is his [belongs to him] to recall it whenever he pleases and in whatever way he pleases consistently with righteousness.

Moreover, the constant exercise of this right by God demonstrates it. By the natural instrumentality of pestilence and famine, or by men as his agents of destruction, God has throughout all history been wiping communities and even nations out of existence. This is a fact which no believer in providence can deny. It is a fact, too, which proves the point at issue. Surely God, who must do right, has the right to adopt as his policy and even formally to command what he is continually doing. This is only another form of the self-evident truth that the right to do involves the right to do deliberately and avowedly.

(b) The justice of God's exercise of this right in adopting a policy of extermination in the case of the Canaanites is fully *manifested* (in the case under consideration) by:

(i) The uniquely gross wickedness of the nations to be exterminated. This was such that they deserved destruction. So abominable were many even of their everyday vices that they may not be named, much less described, in public.

When, therefore, we are disposed to question the intrinsic rightfulness of God's policy respecting these nations, let us remember how wicked they were; and that, as we read in Deuteronomy 9:4 and 5, "Not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart do you go in to possess their land; but for the wickedness of these nations Jehovah your God does drive them out before you, and that he may establish the word which Jehovah swore unto your father, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." It was then because of the

wickedness of these nations that the Lord dealt with them as he did.

(ii) This appears more clearly in view of the warning that they had. They were not cut off without notice. On the contrary, abundant opportunity for repentance was afforded. When the day of vengeance came,

Forty years had passed since the news of the passage of the Red Sea and the wonders in Egypt had proclaimed the greatness of Jehovah above all gods. The recent conquest of the kings of Gilead and Bashan had no less vividly shown that a mighty invincible Power fought on the side of Israel, and rightfully claimed universal homage. Rahab in Jericho had heard of these judgments, and, doubtless, the conviction of the people at large through the land, however they may have stifled reflection, was the same as hers, that 'Jehovah, the God of Israel, was God in heaven above and in earth beneath.'"<sup>6</sup>

If, therefore, because of the enormity of their sins they deserved the punishment which they received, how much more must this have been the case in view of the warning which they had!

(c) The mercifulness, in addition to the justice of God's policy of exterminating the inhabitants of Canaan, appears:

(i) In the fact that their iniquity, had it been rebuked less sharply, would have ruined the surrounding nations. In an important sense, the inhabitants of Canaan were cut off that the rest of the world might not be corrupted. That is, they were treated justly that a far greater number might be treated mercifully. As regarded the world as a whole, it was a very merciful policy.

(ii) This appears more clearly in view of the relation of this policy of extermination to the development of the divine plan of salvation. The nation out of which the Messiah was to arise, through which the highest manifestation of God on earth was to be made known among men, must not only have a local abiding place, but must in it be kept pure and distinct from all others as "the chosen people." Hence it was that, in addition to being given the land of promise, they were commanded to destroy its inhabitants. Had they been permitted merely to subjugate the Canaanites, contact with them would still have corrupted them. Objection to the fate of these nations, therefore, is really an objection to the highest manifestation of the grace of God. He commanded the Canaanites to be destroyed that the Savior of the world might be revealed.

(d) Nor may it be replied that in spite of all this, the divine policy of extermination involved doing evil that good might come. We do not so reason in like cases. It is rather doing good in spite of certain necessary evil consequences. It is analogous to the action of the surgeon who does not refrain from amputating the gangrened limb, though he cannot do this without cutting off much healthy flesh. But this is not all. Not only, as we have

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<sup>6</sup> Geikie, *Hours with the Bible*, II, p. 398.

just seen, would we not condemn in our own case a policy in kind, if not in degree, like the divine policy of extermination, but certain principles that we have already established should justify it for us on God's part. One of these is that we may not object to God's doing immediately and personally what we do not object to his doing mediately, through providence. The other is that in all that is above reason, we should judge of what God ought to do not by our opinion in the matter, but by what he is observed to do in providence. Now nothing is more certain that that providence is administered on the principle that individuals share in the life of the family and of the nation, to which they belong; and that, consequently, it is right that they should participate in its punishments as in its rewards. Hence, God's policy of exterminating the Canaanites does not lay him open to the charge of doing evil that good may come. Though many innocent persons could not but suffer, it was *right*, because of the relation in which they stood to the guilty, that this should be. So much for the intrinsic rightfulness of the divine policy.

(2) These wars of extermination they were never allowed to regard as precedents. Even with the command to drive out and exterminate the Canaanites, they were given for their permanent rule: "If a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwells with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 19:33-34). Thus were they taught the extraordinary nature of their commission. They were not to expect that even God would call on them again for this strange work of judgment. Once more, in the performance of it they were limited, and the danger of it was subsequently as well as at the time clearly implied. Thus, aggressive war was permitted only at certain specified points and for certain specified objects. Otherwise, war was to be merely defensive. Under no circumstances was war for war's sake encouraged. Because he had been a man of war, David was denied the honor of building the temple. In these and in other ways were the people guarded against the indulgence of a fierce spirit and even against the development of a warlike disposition. It was kept impressed on them that always and in all respects they were to be the executors of the will of the Lord.

***A fifth objection to the ethics of the Old Testament is found in its sanctions. It is claimed that the sanctions by which it commends and enforces what it requires are mercenary and, therefore, inferior, if not immoral.***

Thus, Bolingbroke says that God purchased the obedience of His people; the book of Proverbs is charged with motives of prudence rather than of love; the human agent, affirms Munscher, is taught to regard the present rather than the future; and in general it is insisted that sanctions like these, which embody good and ill and do not demand virtue simply for its own sake, are inferior and demoralizing. They could not result in a high type of character, and so they are unworthy of a God of high character.

The solution of this difficulty, at first sight serious, is to be sought along the following lines:

## Response

In order to the vindication of a sanction it must be shown (a) that the sanction is right in itself; that is, that it binds men to duty and deters them from sin by means in themselves right; (b) that in addition to being right in itself, the sanction is adapted to those to whom it is given; (c) that besides this, the sanction, if inferior, is so related to the higher as to prepare for the appreciation of them.

For example, we may at once admit that if a father were to expect his children to do right simply for right's sake, he would be using a higher sanction than if he were now and then to promise a half-holiday as the reward of obedience, or to threaten the loss of a half-holiday as the punishment of disobedience. Nevertheless, we should have no difficulty in justifying his procedure. A half-holiday is good in itself. It may be a very trifling good as compared with many others, but still it is a good. Neither is it wrong that it should be a reward of virtuous action. On the contrary, we instinctively feel it to be right that the sum of good things and not merely the highest good things should follow virtue; and if so, then that the lesser good things should do this as well as the greater. Indeed, one of the strong arguments for a future life is based on the fact that such a life is felt to be demanded, that the glaring inequality between virtue and the few good things which in many cases it enjoys in this life may be evened up. In using, therefore, the half-holiday as a sanction in the training of his children, a father would be doing only what was in itself right.

He would be employing, too, a sanction adapted to those whom he would train. Abstract considerations, such as right for right's sake, though the highest, would probably not appeal to little children. While they might feel, they could not appreciate the full claim of the right simply as such. They would not be sufficiently developed morally to do this. A half-holiday, however, if made a reward of virtue in their case would commend to them most strikingly the excellence, if not the uniqueness, of virtue. That must be good, they would feel, which secures to us such a good as a half-holiday. Thus this sanction, in addition to being right in itself, would be effective. It would prompt that right action which a higher, though more spiritual, sanction would be powerless in the case of children to secure.

Nor would it be open to the objection that the action which it would prompt, while virtuous in matter, would not be so in motive; that the children, because they would do right only for the sake of reward, would not really do right. The unexpressed premise in this reasoning is not necessarily true. Lower motives are not incompatible with higher ones. Because a child eagerly anticipates the promised half-holiday, it does not follow that his obedience is not determined chiefly, or even solely, by love for his parents. Many a child would obey just as fully if no half-holiday were promised. In his case, therefore, it encourages him to obedience without necessarily taking the place of the right motive to obedience. Instead of destroying that motive, it makes it easier for it to operate. Of course, in the case of a child who had no affection for his parents, it would not be so; but it is not the case of such a child that we are considering.

Nor is this all. Not only does the half-holiday make it easier for the child who loves his parents to obey them from love to them, but developing in this way true obedience, it develops the child's whole moral nature.

***A sixth objection to the ethics of the Old Testament is that in it the principle of human brotherhood receives only very partial and inconsistent treatment.***

Thus Bolingbroke declares that the particularism by which the Jews were taught to regard themselves as God's "peculiar people" made them selfish and took them out of obligation to the rest of mankind.

### Response 1

It is not the fact that the brotherhood of man is not clearly taught in the Old Testament. If we compare it with other contemporaneous writings, nothing is more significant than the emphasis which it lays on this principle. Thus in Exodus 23:9 the Israelites were forbidden to oppress strangers. In Leviticus 19:33 they were instructed to treat them kindly. The doors of the Jewish sanctuary were kept guardedly open to proselytes. Numbers 15:15 declares, "As you are, so shall the stranger be before the Lord." Deuteronomy 10:18 represents God as loving the stranger.

The Prophets lay even more stress on this principle. Micah 4:2 predicts that many nations shall come and say, "Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob." Isaiah 56:7 foretells how "God's house shall be a house of prayer for all people." Isaiah 66:19 prophesies the declaration of God's "glory among the Gentiles," and the whole sixtieth chapter is given to describing the access that the gospel shall have to all the nations of the earth. Indeed, the injustice of the objection that we are considering should be apparent when we remember, as has been remarked, that it is in the Hebrew Prophets that we find the first philosophy of universal history, and that the "Chosen People" were the only one in all antiquity that had any, even the least, conception of a redemption for the world.

### Response 2

The objection mistakes the nature, ground, and aim of the particularism of the Hebrew system and, indeed, of the particularism in the divine administration in general. The Hebrews are represented in the Old Testament as brothers in one human race, and as made to differ for a time largely that good may result to all. Such is the nature of the particularism objected to.

This closer relation of the Hebrews to God is not a meritorious one. It is not the consequence of what they are in themselves, but of what God in the exercise of his sovereign grace would make of them. Such is the ground of the particularism in question.

Its aim is twofold:

(1) Defensive: that they may be kept from contamination as being the sons of his love and so his special agents on earth.

(2) Thus the objection under consideration falls. Indeed, it and the objections to the doctrine of election in general proceed on three glaringly false principles: first, that God may not favor some that they may be agents of blessing to all; second, that God cannot love all unless he shows his love in the same way to all; and third and fundamental, that God is bound to treat all sinners, we do not say justly, but alike.

***The seventh and final objection to the ethics of the Old Testament is that it contains positive precepts and indirect requirements and sanctions that are in conflict with the teachings and implications of the New Testament, and so with high morality.***

To be more specific, the objection is that under the Old Testament loose divorce and polygamy were sanctioned, also slavery and also retaliation. How, then, it is asked, can the moral system of the Old Testament be from God?

#### Response 1

That we may appreciate this, let us put ourselves, if we can, in the age in which the precepts that we would vindicate were given. We should then find polygamy and divorce in general use, or rather abuse. We should meet a hardhearted and rebellious people who not only did not regard the marriage relation as supremely sacred, but who were even disposed to act as if it were not sacred at all. In this deplorable state of things we should scarcely deem it prudent, it would seem, to forbid altogether a practice so common as divorce, especially in view of the disposition to dissolve marriage without divorce and even to do away with marriage altogether. Might not divorce, however, be regulated? And if so, would it not be better to regulate it than to prohibit it? So radical a measure as prohibition would be likely to be utterly disregarded. A law regulating divorce, however, would probably be heeded. Through such a law, the husband might be prevented from casting off his wife without ceremony. He might be restrained even from putting her away in a passion. He might be required to take time to consider the matter, to bring it before some scribe or learned man, to go through the long and slow formalities in order to a legal divorce. In this way much more opportunity might be given for the reconciliation of husband and wife. In this way the regulation of divorce would lessen the number of divorces, while the absolute prohibition of it would doubtless, in that rude age, result in utter disregard of the marriage relation. In this way a regulative enactment would do all that could be done then to guard its sacredness.

Take slavery. Were we to go back to the time of the Pentateuch, we should find it well-nigh universal. We should discover, too, that with scarcely an exception it was horribly cruel. Egyptian bondage would seem to be the type rather than the exception. Certainly it was no more oppressive than the slavery with which, hundreds of years later, we meet

in Greece and even in Rome. Nor is this all. In that rude age of which we are speaking, slavery, while it need not have been as rigorous as it was, could scarcely have been other than universal. Indeed, it is difficult to see how it can be dispensed with in certain phases of society without, at all events, entailing severer evils than it produces. When, for example, war is carried on for conquest or revenge, there are but two ways of dealing with the captive--namely, putting them to death or reducing them to slavery. And slavery is the milder of the two. Thus in this, and in many other cases, slavery was the better of the alternatives and may hence be regarded, in such an age, as a blessing rather than a curse.

Under these circumstances, therefore, it would scarcely seem possible to prohibit slavery altogether. If it were done, there would be no likelihood that any would heed the prohibition. Moreover, though it should be possible, it would not appear to be wise. Being the better of two necessary alternatives, it would be an evil to do away with it. It could, however, be regulated. While sanctioned, it might be rendered less oppressive. With considerable prospect of being regarded, we might admonish the master to treat his slave "not as a bond servant, but as a hired servant and a sojourner," and again, "not to rule over him with rigor." We might even, with some hope of carrying our point, provide for a termination of servitude in the case of individual slaves and enjoin masters, when that time should in any case arrive, "not to let the slave go away empty, but to remunerate him liberally out of his flock, his floor and his winepress." We might thus (as the Mosaic law did) while sanctioning slavery, regulate and restrain it in very many directions. In this way we should both render it less oppressive and should foster a sentiment which would tend toward the abolition of slavery. Thus, while we should not eradicate it at once, we should do all that under the circumstances could be done toward its extinction.

## Response 2

Nor may it be objected that God's conduct in these cases is like that, for example, of municipalities which license the admittedly evil saloon, hoping by thus regulating it to work toward its entire prohibition. The objection overlooks what is essential; viz., the difference between man's relation to the present constitution of things and God's relation to it. That difference, as has already been often pointed out, is this. Man, because included in the present constitution of things, is bound by the laws which it implies; and he is thus bound just so long as the present constitution of things continues. Hence, for him of himself to license the saloon even with a view to at length prohibiting it, or for him of himself to sanction unscriptural divorce even for the purpose of finally abolishing it, would be to do evil that good might come. Inasmuch as the present constitution of things, in which he is included and by which he is bound, is such as to render both intemperance and loose divorce contrary to it, man has no right of himself to license or tolerate either for any purpose for even a moment.

God's relation, however, to the constitution of things is radically different. Because he is the author of the present constitution of things and so independent of it, he is not bound by it as is man, but is bound only by the righteousness of his own essential nature. Hence, for righteous reasons God may modify or repeal for the time being the implications of the constitution of things though that constitution continues. Thus he may declare that



divorce under certain limitations shall not be wrong; and if *he* does so in the interest of righteousness, as *he* will and must, then it will neither be wrong for men to use divorce within those limitations, nor for him to provide that they may. In a word, while man--if he were of himself to license loose divorce--would be doing evil though he were to act out of regard for righteousness, God--when he licenses it--is simply doing what he as God has the right to do and what thus in his case is right, that good may come. Of course, it would be otherwise in the case of precepts such as that requiring truthfulness, which are founded on his immutable nature. These even he may not and cannot change on any account. God never relaxes in the interest of idolatry or because of idolatry. This is because idolatry is against his nature. Laws, however, like those which we have been considering and which are rooted only in the order of things which he himself has freely appointed, he may modify when the "hardness of men's hearts" or other abnormal reasons--as the changes wrought by sin--render such a course in the interest of morality.

### Response 3

Nor may it be objected either that God's policy in regulating the evils under consideration instead of prohibiting them seems to be a recognition of the false principle that ability limits obligation. His concession is not to inability, but to incapacity; not to a lack of moral power growing out of a sinful disposition, but to a weak (because undeveloped) moral nature. Now for this latter, which we call incapacity, men may not be held responsible. It is self-evident that one may not be required to be or to do what he has not the faculties to be or to do, or what he has not the opportunity to be or to do. The standard of right is the same for a child as for a man, but the child may not be expected to realize the standard as the man is expected to. He is too little.

Nor may it be replied that the incapacity of the Israelites was in part the result of sin; that their wickedness both retarded their moral development and weakened their moral perceptions. This is true. It does not, however, alter the case. As A.A. Hodge says, "this irresponsibility arises solely from the bare fact of the inability (incapacity). It matters not at all in *this respect* whether the inability (incapacity) be self-induced or not, if only it be a real incapacity. A man, for instance, who has put out his own eyes in order to avoid the draft may be justly held responsible for *that act*, but he can nevermore be held responsible for seeing, i.e., for using eyes which he does not any longer possess."<sup>7</sup> In like manner, God might not have made concessions to any inability of the Israelites that consisted in the lack of proper desires and affections, that, in a word, was voluntary and so sinful. But he might, and he did, make numerous concessions to lack of capacity or of opportunity; and he might, as he did, do so when this lack of capacity or of opportunity was in large part the result of sin. This would not be to affirm the false principle that ability limits obligation; it would be to affirm the true principle that the nature and not the origin of a human condition determines the relation of its consequences to responsibility. For the consequences of what is voluntary and so [therefore] moral, however caused, we are responsible; and so God may not make concessions to these consequences. But for the consequences of what is not moral--for what is incapacity rather than inability however

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<sup>7</sup> *Outlines of Theology*, p. 344.

caused, even though the result of sin--we are not responsible, and so God may and often should, as he does, make concessions to these.

#### Response 4

The difference between the Old Testament and the New in the respects under review is formal rather than real; of degree only and not of kind. The inconsistency alleged and objected to is one of appearance merely. True identity does not reside in looks or even in sameness of material, but in unity of organizing principle. The plant in full flower appears altogether unlike the little blade which first makes its way above the ground, and its elements are constantly being destroyed and renewed and increased and modified. Nevertheless, the plant in full flower is the same with the little blade. There is the most beautiful and wonderful consistency between them; the organizing principle of both is identical.

### **In What, Then, Will the Complete Vindication of Old Testament Ethics Consist?**

*First*, has just been shown, it is not required of us to relieve the ethical system of the Old Testament of the charge of inferiority to that of the New. Indeed, were it not inferior to it, that would be a decided objection. It would then be out of relation to and so unfitted for its own stage in God's scheme of ethical progress.

*Second*, what, however, is required of us, if we would vindicate the ethics of the Old Testament, is:

#### Requirement 1

To evince, as has been done, that this inferiority consists in incompleteness only and so involves no imperfection and thus no immorality. The inferiority is that of the seed to the blade, that of the blade to the budding plant, that of the bud to the flower, that of the flower to the fruit. Though inferior to the flower in development, and so failing to manifest not a few of its beauties, the bud is just as perfect as the flower if we consider it in relation to its function in the expanding life of the plant. While it is a very incomplete exhibition of the life of the plant, there is in it nothing out of harmony with the life principle of the plant. Indeed, were it more nearly complete, it would be out of harmony with the general development of the plant. Both in itself, therefore, and in its adaptation to the growth which it expresses and forwards, it is perfect.

The vindication of the ethics of the Old Testament calls on us first of all to establish that, while less nearly complete than and so inferior to New Testament ethics, both in itself and with reference to the moral life that it expresses and would forward it is *perfect*.

#### Requirement 2

We must show that with all its incompleteness and consequent inferiority to New Testament ethics, Old Testament ethics is so different from and so superior to the ethics of all contemporaneous religions as to be most evidently divinely unique. Not only is it all that it should be in itself, but in the respects in which it is most manifestly this, it is conspicuously out of analogy with the other ethical systems of that day. It is so evidently not of earth that it must be from heaven. Its characteristic features are clearly of unearthly origin. These features, these elements of unique superiority over the ethics of that age, are as follows:

- (1) The emphasis put on the personality of God. As we saw, this is *the* characteristic of the ethics of the Old Testament. It refers everything to the will of God. Duty is what he bids us do; virtuous is what he would have us be; the supreme good is his voluntary and gracious favor.
- (2) The emphasis put on the holiness of God. Among the ethnic religions no such doctrine was inculcated. In a word, the conception of Jehovah as the Holy One, as the Righteous Ruler, was original. It was a unique excellence of Old Testament ethics.
- (3) The emphasis laid on the personality of man. In striking contrast with all heathen views, according to which man is either subject to nature or has nature constantly before him as a cramping and never-wholly-to-be-overcome power, the Old Testament teaches that man is made in the image of the divine Person; that, like him, he is a free and ought to be a holy being; that dominion over nature has been given to him; and that he will be held strictly accountable for the use which he may make of his freedom.
- (4) The resulting practical conception of evil. Heathen ethics relegated it almost exclusively to the purely ideal sphere. It conceived of evil as a mere possibility, or as an exceptional and isolated reality, or as a natural necessity which underlay all human guilt and in which, consequently, guilt lost its distinctive character as guilt. The Old Testament, on the contrary, and as might have been expected from its unique discernment of divine and human personality, looks evil earnestly and squarely in the face and regards it as a sad all-prevalent reality, the guilt of which lies in the free act of man and is participated in without exception. "Hence, it is not the power of fate but the law of righteousness to which he gives prominence in the intricate fabric of human affairs."
- (5) The spirituality of the ethical life. This results from the Old Testament's vivid conception of both sin and personality. Righteousness attaches fundamentally to the will, to the heart, to the personality; and it is not only the sinful act, but equally the disposition to evil that is condemned.
- (6) The Old Testament makes faith the root of true obedience. As it points to the will of God as the sole standard of duty, so it points to the grace of God as the only adequate power for duty.
- (7) The hope for the future that pervades the Old Testament. From the protevangelium to

the last word of the latest prophet, its look is ever forward; nor is there ever a doubt that that look will be rewarded.

(8) This moral regeneration and the redemption of which it was part were conceived of by the Old Testament as of the world. The "peculiar people" of God, the Hebrews alone of all antiquity, were taught to regard Him as the Savior of *all* men. In almost no respect does Old Testament ethics show its superiority to all other systems so conspicuously as in this, its universalism.

(9) The already and frequently implied progressive character of Old Testament ethics. Nowhere does this appear so clearly as in relation to the particularism and the universalism which we have just been considering. The first conception of charity, for example, was that it should not extend outside the nation of Israel. The stranger who had not become a citizen was to be beyond its reach. This limitation, however, is one that tends to pass away. In the book of Ruth, a Moabite woman is taken into a Hebrew family and becomes famous as the ancestress of King David. The beautiful prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the Temple does not fail to include "the stranger who comes out of a far country." In the Prophets, the universal spirit of love begins to breathe out hopes of a time when of Egypt and Assyria it shall be said by God, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance" (Isa. 19:25). As another has written, "All this shows that while the moral codes of other nations either remain where they began, or else grow narrower and less pure with the progress of years, that of Israel tends to purify itself and to widen out into a stream that shall carry cleansing and blessing to all mankind." A law with such inherent power of working out to wider accomplishment, and with such force of self-purification, was the product of no mere human legislation.

(10) The unique and inferentially supernatural superiority of the ethics of the Old Testament appears finally and yet more significantly in the humane spirit that pervades it. Not only does it prohibit, as we have seen, all unnecessary harshness, it is characteristically and positively kind. [It is] a law that exacts strict justice, for which reason it is often objected to as harsh, [but] it is also a law whose spirit, as truly if not so conspicuously as in that of the New Testament, is love.

The Mosaic code did, it is true, employ the death penalty more frequently than we do, yet it never employed or allowed cruelty in punishment. Its criminal legislation was vastly more humane than that of England only 150 years ago. This, particularly in that barbarous age, is worthy of notice.

We may not, however, content ourselves with negative proofs, when positive ones are so numerous that we can mention only a few of them.

For example, the provision made for the poor: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, neither shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I am the

LORD your God" (Lev. 19:9,10). To this add other provisions for the poor. It was said that the poor were never to cease out of the land (Deut. 15:11). Therefore, "You shall open your hand wide unto your brother, to your poor, and to your needy in your land" (Deut. 15:11). Every man was to have a care for his neighbor, and if he saw him "waxing poor and falling into decay"--getting behind-hand, we should say--he was by law to relieve him (Lev. 25:35-37), even though he was a foreigner. No interest was to be taken of such a one, nor any increase; i.e., no payment in any kind over and above the amount loaned. In this and in other respects, the law of the Old Testament was much more humane than the best legislation of today. A law of Massachusetts, for example, allows pawn-brokerage. It sets no limit and makes no provision with regard to it, except a fine for carrying it on without a license. The poor man who is compelled to pawn his watch or his furniture is at the mercy of the broker for the best bargains that he can make. And it generally turns out that the article is lost for a tithe of its value. Our system of pledges is by attachments, mortgages, and bonds under which, in failure of redemption, the law knows no mercy and is always in favor of the creditor--never of the debtor.

Set now in contrast with this the Mosaic law. Pledges might be taken, but certain articles--for instance the upper and nether millstones and the widow's raiment--might not be taken. But when pledges were taken of the poor, they were not to be kept overnight. When it was raiment especially, it was to be returned before sundown. It was a law in favor of the poor. Still further with reference to the poor, the fatherless, and the stranger (as if the provision noticed were not enough), every third year there was to be a tithing of the increase for them. The stranger also was not to be vexed or oppressed, as was the custom among the surrounding and barbarous nations, the remains of which custom are to be found in modern legislation in the form of passports, imposts, prohibitions and disabilities laid upon the foreigner and his traffic.

But enough. In the words of one who has made the institutions of the Old Testament the subject of special study,

"The Mosaic, so far from being a barbarous or bloody code, surpasses beyond comparison every other code of the world ever known, for delicate, thoughtful, and beneficent humaneness....No one, I suppose, will accuse Professor Huxley of prejudice in favor of the Old Testament, yet he says: "There is no code of legislation, ancient or modern, at once so just and so merciful, so tender to the weak and poor, as the Jewish law.""<sup>8</sup>

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