Wrestling with the God of Revelation

View PDF



Jonathan Arking is currently an undergraduate at Princeton University studying philosophy. This article appears in issue 41 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Wrestling with the God of Revelation: Preserving Moral Necessity in the Face of Divine Text and Divine Encounter[1]

by Jonathan Arking

The Problem with Fundamentalism

In his wonderful new book, *To Be a Holy People: Jewish Tradition and Ethical Values*, Rabbi Eugene Korn sets out to examine and explain the relationship between the ethical/moral values and Jewish tradition.[2] In his chapter entitled "Moralization in Jewish Law: Divine Commands, Rabbinic Reasoning and Waging a Just War," Rabbi Korn proposes four potential lines of reasoning in the face of a morally challenging divine command (such as perpetrating a genocide and mass slaughter of non-combatants during war).[3] The first two options are The Kierkegaardian Argument—in which one recognizes the tension between divine command and morality but suspends their moral judgment in favor of the divine command—and the Divine Command Morality Argument—in which divine commands are asserted to be constitutive of, or at least perfectly exemplary of, true morality. As Rabbi Korn articulates, neither option has backing in traditional rabbinic tradition. Further, both fail to satisfy the biblical reader concerned with the notion of moral necessity, the prioritization of acting morally as a necessary prerequisite for any action taken. The Kierkegaardian argument simply cedes the argument and admits that if one follows it, one will act immorally. The Divine Command Morality Argument at least makes the claim that one who follows it will always act in a morally perfect way, but is implausible in the face of epistemological concerns about both any specific reading of a sacred text, and contention over which texts are sacred. There is widespread argument over how to read nearly every passage in the Bible, and according to Jewish tradition, the text itself is multivocal and cannot be confined to one "correct reading." This implies that were one to try to act morally only on the basis of strict hermeneutical interpretation, it would be impossible to act in a perfectly moral way because one could never attain, or at least never be sure they had attained, the true "objective" reading of the text.

Further, there is intense contestation as to what scriptures are divine and could serve as the basis for this type of fundamentalism; a Jew who reads their own scripture in a fundamentalist way is nonetheless likely to condemn a member of another religion who commits violence in the name of a fundamentalist reading of their own scripture and vice versa. One may try to argue that if they could establish the truth of their revelation (e.g., this text, not those other ones, was revealed by God), this worry of epistemology could be ignored. I think this is dubious given the assumptions one would need for such a claim to hold including not only that this text and not those others were the result of revelation, but also that the revelation was given by a morally perfect God. This is of course unprovable. There is no method of distinguishing between the revelation of a morally perfect God and, say, a non-physical entity capable of transmitting information that is not perfectly moral, without actually just morally investigating the divinely revealed text. Further, the worry about correct interpretation remains, as well as concerns of perfect transmission of the revelatory message. My point here is not that any given scripture is not morally perfect, only that a claim to its sanctity does not establish that on its own, as there are many scriptures that nonetheless seem to have competing moral visions, at least at times. It seems, then, that the moral perfection of a given text could not be known to the reader a priori and could only be the case upon investigation and subjecting the text to some external criterion, namely their own moral judgment. This, however, is exactly what Divine Command Morality is trying to object to.

There is a further moral problem with the Divine Command Morality Argument in that its method seems to itself call its morality into question; to determine whether or not to massacre innocent civilians, including children, on the basis of a reading of a verse rather than based on the atrocity such an act would be relative to the people it would affect seems seriously misguided. Morality, one might think, ought to be a response to the needs and situations of those whom we affect with our actions, not simply a hermeneutical game to be figured out regardless of how that may literally destroy the lives of many. The “necessity” of moral necessity is thus non-existent in Divine Command Morality, as actions are contingent on subjective readings of texts that are themselves contested as valid sources of fundamentalist morality, instead of responses to the real lives of real people in front of us.

In Defense of the Heretical Argument

The latter two options that Rabbi Korn presents are what he terms the Heretical Argument and the Casuistic Argument. Both arguments accept at least the prima facie moral incorrectness of the divine command, but while the former concludes that the moral imperative must therefore override the divine command, the latter attempts to harmonize the command and morality by introducing extenuating factors or new features to the command. While the casuistic argument is clearly the favored method of rabbinic tradition, as Rabbi Korn details, it does not succeed in truly resolving the tension between the divine command and morality. Simply put, the casuistic approach is methodologically, and not fundamentally distinct from the heretical approach. Rabbi Korn dismisses the heretical approach outright because “no religious tradition can use this argument and retain its theological coherence or moral authority.” The idea here is that once one accepts that morality ought to override an explicit command, any reason to follow any commands at all falls away. The text becomes nothing more than something to be shunned or accepted based on the subjective human reader. But is this less true for the casuistic approach? Is the decision to read a verse against its plain meaning, or to introduce contingencies found nowhere in the text, or to read a commandment entirely out of existence (as in the case of the wayward son) not a subjective human decision to reject the text in front of oneself? Additionally, it challenges the notion of approaching sacred text with integrity; it asks us to read a text against what we see with our own eyes, and then claim that the reading we are imposing

onto the text is how the text actually ought to be read! Finally, the Casuistic Argument shares a deficiency with Divine Command Morality in that it emphasizes technicality rather than humanity, making moral action rely on stretched hermeneutics rather than on the actual "moral patients" from whom moral reality arises.

I thus want to return to the heretical argument and work out some of the implications of what it would mean to adopt it, from the perspective of both hermeneutics and theology. This project stems from a desire to engage with all of the options at our disposal, even if the theological implications of doing so are challenging or beyond contemporary traditional norms. It also aims to preserve the integrity of reading sacred text as it is, even if that sometimes conflicts with how we think it ought to be. It should also be noted that in opposition to Rabbi Korn's statement that one who adopts the heretical approach loses all moral authority, I contend that the so-called heretical approach may be the only path to preserve moral necessity—and thus any possible claim to moral authority. Even if one does opt for the casuistic approach, I believe the following analysis remains quite relevant, as the method of prioritizing one's morality over the plain meaning of a sacred text is less relevant than its occurrence in terms of both hermeneutical and theological ramifications. Thus, for the remainder of this article we will be trying to think about the question: What does it mean to engage with a text as truly divinely inspired while also asserting that one will not act in accordance with that text if they believe it to be morally problematic?

Learning Normative Action through Imitating God

One of the primary themes of right action in our tradition is that of imitating God, the basic assumption being that if one imitates God, one will be acting correctly. This notion of *imitatio dei* appears a number of times throughout the Jewish tradition, as, for example, it does in Leviticus, when God proclaims, "You shall be holy, for I, your God Hashem, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). In the rabbinic tradition, there are a few explicit statements telling the reader to either act in certain ways or have dispositions in imitation of God:

> **And Rabbi ?ama, son of Rabbi ?anina, says: What is** the meaning of that **which is written: "After the Lord your God shall you walk,** and Him shall you fear, and His commandments shall you keep, and unto His voice shall you hearken, and Him shall you serve, and unto Him shall you cleave" (Deuteronomy 13:5)? **But is it** actually **possible for a person to follow the Divine Presence? But hasn't it already been stated: "For the Lord your God is a devouring fire,** a jealous God" (Deuteronomy 4:24), and one cannot approach fire.
>
> He explains: **Rather,** the meaning is **that one should follow the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He.** He provides several examples. **Just as He clothes the naked, as it is written: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them"** (Genesis 3:21), **so too,** should **you clothe the naked. He, visits the sick…so too,** should **you visit the sick.** Just as **the Holy One, Blessed be He, consoles mourners… so too,** should **you console mourners.** Just as **the Holy One, Blessed be He, buried the dead… so too,** should **you bury the dead.**[4] (Translation from Sefaria.org. Bold is from Sefaria and indicates literal translation, while non-bolded words are added to provide grammatical cohesiveness to the passage.)

Within this passage, we can see a number of important aspects of this rabbinic conception of imitating God. First, the very notion of "being like God" is taken as a biblical command. Secondly, it is immediately pointed out that it is impossible to truly imitate the rabbis' conception of God. This may be for two reasons. First, this may be thought of as a literal impossibility. The God of the rabbis is a generally incorporeal, mighty to incredibly superhuman levels, the creator of the universe; God is a "devouring fire," a being whose nature is radically unlike that of any person. But it seems that, in context, Rabbi Hama is making a moral claim: God is "a devouring fire, a jealous God." The phrase "a jealous God" is absent in the Hebrew quotation in the Gemara. It is only implied and left for the reader to fill in on their own, as if acknowledging that God could not be imitated because God had bad moral qualities could not be stated outright. But this is exactly what Rabbi Hama seems to be insinuating when he responds to his own questions by asserting the proper *moral* virtues of God to be imitated, rather than any abstract characteristics of divine nature to which we ought to aspire.

This notion of imitating God insofar as God "clothes the naked," "visits the sick," "comforts the mourners," and "buries the dead," but not God's jealousy, is a fascinating theological statement by Rabbi Hama. Throughout the Bible we read of God's care and love for the downtrodden, but also that "Hashem is a man of war."[5] The multiplicity of God's portrayals throughout the Bible allows, and maybe even forces, the rabbis to make specific decisions as to which aspects of God are to be imitated. As Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, an influential theologian and legal scholar within Orthodox Judaism in the twentieth century, writes, "The rabbis in the Talmud were guided by the insight: God forbid there should be anything in the application of the Tora to the actual life situation that is contrary to the principles of ethics."[6] The ethics of *imitatio dei* are thus shaped by the moral sentiments of the reader; God can no longer be invoked as an excuse to act immorally because God is only to be imitated only insofar as we, the moral reader, deem it so. In order to preserve moral action, selective reading is necessary.

The Godwrestling Model of Navigating Morality and Integrity in Reading Sacred Text

However, within this rabbinic model of imitation of God, we of course run into the problem of demystifying our sacred texts and making ourselves into the arbiters of their worth. What is the purpose of Scripture if it cannot teach us how to live, but is merely a mirror off of which we reflect our own values? And does this model not ask us to ignore real literary evidence we may find in the text and ask us to claim that the text asserts something that we think it does not? This would seem to be both epistemically and psychologically untenable. I propose that we turn back to the talmudic passage to begin to formulate an approach to the dilemma. Interestingly, Rabbi Hama does not immediately answer his initial question of how to walk in the ways of God with his selectively picked examples that focus on God caring for the downtrodden. Instead, he first raises the stakes of the question by pointing out the potentially problematic nature of God as found in the biblical text. There is no attempt to read out of existence God's jealousy even while there is a deliberate choice to see it as non-normative.[7] The text leaves open the question of how to theologically deal with the fact of a God (or portrayal of God) who is not worth emulating in all ways, but implies that it is a question that, while real and challenging, ought not to come in the way of acting morally. There is thus a two-tiered approach to the reading of biblical text. To preserve its authenticity, we ought to engage with it as we truly find it, reckoning with a portrayal of a jealous and violent God. But at the same time, the religious person needs to interact with it as a reader who locates their way of life in the biblical text. This requires not just that we read *the* Bible, but that we read a moral Bible, a Bible that preaches love and obligation

and care for those who are in need. This is also consonant with a rigorous oral tradition that is not in fact committed to applying literal understandings of the Torah, but is already in the market, so to speak, of creative normative applications of divine texts. This overall process could lead to a Rawlsian-type "reflective equilibrium" in which the reader has both principles that ought to be expressed in the text, but also reads the text honestly in hope of informing and challenging those principles.[8]

This dual approach to scripture finds a prominent voice in the work of Judith Plaskow, the author of the first book of Jewish feminist theology, *Standing Again at Sinai*.[9] As a feminist grappling with the absence of women in both the biblical and rabbinic traditions, Plaskow sees herself as both within the tradition, working to make true the conviction that Berkovits attributes to the rabbis, and as an outsider, seriously challenging the foundations and authority of the Jewish tradition:

> I pronounce the Bible patriarchal; but in taking the time to explore it, I claim it as a text that matters to me. This double relation is not unthinking. It stems from my belief that the Jewish feminist must embrace with equal passion (at least) two different attitudes to Jewish sources.[10]

One could assert that the Bible is not patriarchal by misreading it, or one could embrace patriarchy because it is asserted in the Bible. To the moral and honest reader of the Bible, neither of these views is possible. Integrity demands that we not simply read our own values back into the text and that we do our best to understand the Bible on its own terms. But this cannot, according to Plaskow, lead us to either abandon the tradition or to accept it as it is.[11] Instead, it forces us into a space of grappling, or what Plaskow calls "Godwrestling." Godwrestling is for Plaskow what occurs after moments of encounter with God, which "would need to be interpreted and applied, wrestled with and puzzled over, passed down and lived out before they came to us as the Torah of God."[12] When one sees their own encounter with the biblical text as one of encounter with God, they too then must undergo Godwrestling, struggling over how to interpret and apply, wrestle with and puzzle over, that which they have encountered. This allows for an encounter with a biblical text that does not automatically happen to align with one's values. But it also recognizes and accepts the necessarily subjective matter of grappling with and applying the biblical texts to our lives. This model thus preserves the necessarily dual natured encounter with the biblical text, the integrity based attempt to engage with what is written, and the subjective lens through which we read the Bible as in accordance with moral principles. It does so by embracing the complexity of engaging with God, a moment that requires us to challenge ourselves and our assumptions, and God as well.

Theological Responses to the Godwrestling Approach

However, what might it mean that encounter with God requires us to rethink our conception of God? And, further, what does it mean that God's revelation requires subjective mediation to preserve its prompting of morally perfect action?[13] This takes us to the brink of (if not over and into) the discussion of theodicy, and how to understand a God that seemingly acts unjustly. God's moral imperfection is challenging both in its incarnation in God's messages and revealed nature (as described in scripture), as well as its effects on the world as it relates to the suffering of the innocent. I see three main potential responses (although there certainly are more) to the challenge of how to understand God

in light of a world and a model of reading sacred texts that denies God's moral perfection: 1) God simply is not morally perfect. Moral mistakes arise in God's revealed word and works because God does not have access to true morality; 2) God intentionally commands and acts in ways that call on humans to respond with protest against God. This serves as a means of moral education or test and helps improve the overall state of morality in the world. This approach could also include an appeal to moral progress and divine commands given as a concession to historical context that God wants us to overcome; 3) There is a distinction between God as an infinite, morally perfect being, and (the) God of history and revelation with whom humans interact. In the remainder of this article, I will try to present a view that makes sense of and incorporates all three responses. It is worth noting that there is no logical necessity in incorporating the different approaches, and one may find one sufficiently compelling or choose to join some together in different ways. Nonetheless, I intend for the process of incorporating these approaches to serve as a model of the type of thinking around this issue I personally find compelling. I will argue that a conception of God who has a highest order desire to be morally good but is limited in knowledge of moral perfection gives rise to human interaction with a God calling on humans to partner with God in bettering the world and God Godself. I present this view by rooting it in biblical and traditional Jewish texts. I do this not to prove its correctness within a biblical or rabbinic framework, but to convey my thoughts in a way that demonstrates their relation to the theological dialogue that has influenced me. I believe the content of the view stands on its own, but is best presented as continuous with and arising from the content it is commenting on.

Response 1: God Is Morally Limited

The question of theodicy, or justifying God, has been answered by one strain of Jewish thought by rejecting the project altogether; there is evil in the world that cannot be justified, therefore justification for God is impossible. In recent times, this has been notably presented in Elie Wisel's *The Trial of God*, in which God is placed on trial for the suffering of God's people and found guilty.[14] Similarly, in his paper "Judging God: Learning from the Jewish Tradition," Episcopol Priest Daniel London relates the story of Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, who, on behalf of his people who are suffering, challenges God. London writes that through "his bold prayers of protest, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak acts as though he has the power and authority to kick God off His throne for not taking care of His people." Thus, God is not justified at all, but condemned. According to London, "Levi Yitzhak offers no theology to reconcile the dissonance between the deified Torah and the God who fails to follow it. Instead he brings the dissonance to God in prayer and offers prayers of intercession for Israel."[15] Theology cannot do the work to justify God because the distance between a morally perfect God and the reality we inhabit is simply too large. Instead, it must be conceded that God is morally limited; the world God has created and the scripture God has given are reflections of God, but this says more about the moral character of God than the works, which have already been judged as deficient. This notion of God's moral limitation can be seen in the Torah in the case of God's desire to wipe out Israel after the sin of the calf. Nonetheless, Moses confronts God and convinces God not to destroy the people (Exodus 32). Further, God is seemingly bound by the limitations on God's knowledge within the biblical narrative, including when God "regrets" that God had created humankind upon seeing the depths of their sin (implying God had not known this would occur). Michael Carasik further writes that "the unspoken assumption that implicitly underlies this repeated focus on God's testing the heart[16] is that when God wants to know what is in a particular human being's mind, God cannot sense it, but must deduce it."[17] Given God's failure to create a moral world, it seems plausible to accept these limitations on God's knowledge, and given the moral imperfections of God's teaching, plausible to accept the limitations on God's moral knowledge, especially when this lack of knowledge is reinforced by the presumably sacred text itself.

Response 2: God Desires Our Protest

Once we have posited God as limited, though, how should we interact with God and God's lackings? Alternatively, we may ask, could we understand what we see as moral imperfections as consistent with a morally good or perfect God? Both questions lead us to the notion of protesting God in God's name. The first instance of protest against God's injustice in the bible occurs in Genesis 18, when Abraham is informed that God is planning on destroying the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham responds by challenging God, "Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"[18] Clearly, Abraham is holding God up to a standard external to God. But this is occurring not just as a chance encounter, but following the Bible's telling of God's internal dialogue in which God relates that God "singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of The Lord by doing what is just and right, in order that The Lord may bring about for Abraham what has been promised him."[19] Thus, seemingly, God is aware of the potential for injustice in God's plan and welcomes Abraham's challenge to God's decision. In this model of Abraham, faith in God is in God's goodness, not as an acceptance of what is as a manifestation thereof, but in God's desire to be called to the good. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks comments that "Abraham was the first person in recorded history to protest the injustice of the world in the name of God, rather than accept it in the name of God."[20] God is, in this model, a call to morality, a call to hold others, even God, accountable. Abraham is just the first of a long list of prophets who act as intermediaries not just from God to the people, but from the people to God. As Yochanan Muffs, in his analysis of prophets interceding with God on behalf of the people, entitled "Who Will Stand in the Breach?: A Study of Prophetic Intercession," details,

> The prophet… is also an independent advocate to the heavenly court who attempts to rescind the evil decree by means of the only instruments at his disposal, prayer and intercession. He is first the messenger of the divine court to the defendant, but his mission boomerangs back to the sender. Now, he is no longer the messenger of the court; he becomes the agent of the defendant, attempting to mitigate the severity of the decree.[21]

To engage with God in the face of injustice is an act not of rebellion but the ultimate prophetic act of creating intimacy with God.

What is important about this approach is not just that it can be rooted back in the biblical text and thus adopted comfortably by the religious person, but that it presents a model of interaction with God that can make some sense of our challenge. In this model, what it means to interact with God has been radically transformed. The prophet, the person who is most intimately in communion with God, is not a passive recipient of the divine word, but a partner in a dialogue, engaging in reciprocal conversation to figure out the good. What it means to encounter God is to engage in Godwrestling, to bring oneself, with all one's convictions and beliefs, into the space of the encounter. This therefore represents a nuancing of our treatment of Plaskow's notion of Godwrestling, in which the encounter with the divine occurs for the human as an overwhelming passive experience that later gets forced into subjectivity so that it can be made sense of. Instead, here, encounter with God has a similar structure, but allows for a bringing of the subjective into the initial objective encounter; to encounter God in this way is to open oneself to being an active interlocutor with God, a partner God seeks and calls for.

In this vein is also the notion of divinely intended moral progress, or the notion that what we encounter as immoral was merely a concession to historical contingency that God would not want us to adhere to today. Slavery, for example, can be understood as something that the Torah thought ought not to be practiced, but that for historical reasons it could not abolished. Proponents of this view might then point to the reality of today in which slavery is not practiced and argue that this serves as evidence that this is what was truly intended by the divine. Nonetheless, this view seems to give little guidance in regard to when we should invoke this notion and if it should be invoked proactively at all. Still, it presents a model of how to understand changes in practice against divine revelation as in line with what God truly wants of us.

Response 3: Protest Improves God

The third potential response to our dilemma I wish to consider is that protesting God is a means of improving God. This model appears, I believe, when we consider the conclusion of the book of Job. Throughout the book, we read of the unjust punishment of Job and Job's argument with his interlocutors. The dialogue builds throughout, with Job calling out God Godself to be held to account for Job's fortune. When, at the end of the book of Job, God reveals Godself from out of the whirlwind, we, the readers, expect some justification for Job's mistreatment at the hands of God. Instead, we read as God overpowers Job by telling Job of God's might in a thoroughly unsatisfying response; power is simply no excuse to not act well. Tellingly, after Job responds to God for a second time, acknowledging God's might and therefore recanting, God no longer speaks to Job. It is as if God has destroyed Job's faith in a God who cares for justice, and Job now recognizes the futility of arguing against a being who is unaccountable, and the Job-God relationship is therefore undone. Nonetheless, Job turns to God in the interest of those in need to conclude the book, praying on behalf of his interlocutors. There is thus little joy in the relationship Job has uncovered with God, but a hope, a refusal to let go of a conception of God that can help those in need. This then introduces a hopeful conclusion, one in which the reality of the dissonance between the world and God's justice is acknowledged, but taken not as inevitable, and instead as a current reality we ought to work to repair. To continue one's relationship with God in the face of God's injustice is done not by recognizing that God could be better, that we could form a relationship in which it is we who hold God accountable. Even in the depths of the failure of God to justify Godself, Job turns to God because God is needed by those who are suffering, and God needs a prompting, a call of justice from God's prophets in order to engage morally with the world.

By distinguishing between God as God wants to be and God as God is (at least when related to human action), we can conceive of this call to engage in moral improvement of a limited God as itself a Godly act. In Lurianic Kabbalah, a school of Jewish mystical thought that arises in Safed in the mid-sixteenth century,[22] creation occurs only via *tzimtzum*, or contraction. *Tzimtzum* occurred when the infinite God, the *ein sof*, contracted Godself in order to "make room" for the world. However, this forced the infinite God to limit Godself in vessels, which then broke because they could not contain God's infinitude. In this model, God as Hashem or Elohim is simply the incarnation of the truly infinite *ein sof* that is necessarily broken because only a confined (and therefore incomplete) God could interact with the world without overwhelming it.[23] This then gives rise to the notion of *tikkun*, of fixing, which is the basis of the kabbalistic worldview, that when one acts well, one is literally repairing both the world and God. While he does not present as ontologically real kabbalistic metaphysics,[24] Jonathan Sacks appeals to a similar notion in his book *To Heal a Fractured World*, when he writes, "God, by entering the human situation, enters time, and thus uncertainty and risk."[25] While I too am not inclined to take as literally true the kabbalistic notion of *tzimtzum*, the notion that

God as God interacts with the world as necessarily constricted seems useful for our project. Specifically, it gives us the context in which we can talk about God having a higher form, or truer self, that we are trying to bring out when we engage in protest against the divine. When God acts unjustly, to argue with God is not just to refuse to release one's moral commitments, but it is an act of divine *tikkun*, of bringing God's actuality closer to alignment with God's potentiality and God's higher order will. In order to make sense of God's limitedness and God's moral imperfection in the context of a God who is nonetheless worth engaging with, we presume that God not only can be better, but fundamentally desires to be better and to be bettered by us, the reader of scripture and participant in the divine encounter. God is thus not fixed as a morally imperfect being, doomed to continue acting and revealing Godself in morally problematic ways, but instead can, just like ourselves, be redeemed by the power of human action.

Conclusion

In this article, I have asserted that in order to preserve the morality of one's biblically rooted actions, one ought to subjectively read the bible through the lens of morality. Nonetheless, I maintained that one must concurrently affirm the text as they find it and acknowledge its problematic or immoral teachings. In order to make theological sense of this model of reading sacred text, I argued that one can accept God as morally limited while also desiring us to improve God through engagement with God. Thus, the act of subjectively reading normatively authoritative text ought to be understood as just such an engagement and thus an act desired by God Godself. It is an act of improving God and God's message on earth, an act of *tikkun* that will bring about a better God and a better world.

While I have attempted to engage seriously with sources and scholarship, throughout the writing process it has been clear to me that this piece of writing is at least intending to follow the method that it sets out. Sources were appealed to not as authoritative but as explanatory, and I presented worldviews rather than arguments. By doing so, I hope to have given a glimpse into my own Godwrestling that comes out of my encounters with the text I take to be sacred, and thus shed light on the content of this article through its form. Whether or not I am entirely correct in my reading of scripture, or if I am in fact wrong about the nature of God, is less vital to the project than the genuine desire to make sense of the tension between moral necessity and the presumed reality and objectivity of the divine encounter.

Works Cited

Arking, Jonathan. "Halakhic Response to Meta-Halakhic Values," *Conversations* issue 39, Spring 2022 pp. 76–89.

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sotah*, 14a. Sefaria.org.

Bamidbar Rabbah 13:16.

Berkovits, Eliezer. "The Nature and Function of Jewish Law." *Not in Heaven*, Shalem Press, 2010, pp. 3–70.

Carasik, Michael. “The Limits of Omniscience.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (2000): 221–32.

Gutie?rrez, Gustavo. *On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987.

“Isaac ben Solomon Luria.” Encyclopædia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Isaac-ben-Solomon-Luria.

Korn, Eugene. *To Be a Holy People: Jewish Tradition and Ethical Values*. Urim Publications, 2021.

Lamm, Norman. “Amalek and the Seven Nations.” In *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought.* Jersey City: KTAV Pub. House, Inc., 2007.

London, Daniel DeForest. “Judging God: Learning from the Jewish Tradition of Protest against God.” *Journal of Comparative Theology.* Harvard Divinity School, June 2, 2016.

“Lurianic Kabbala.” Encyclopædia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lurianic-Kabbala.

Magid, Shaul. *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala*. Indiana University Press, 2008.

Muffs, Yochanan. “Who Will Stand in the Breach?: A Study of Prophetic Intercession.” In *Love & Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel*, 9–48. New York, NY: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992.

Plaskow, Judith. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

Sacks, Jonathan. “Covenant & Conversation: Lech Lecha: A Palace in Flames.” Rabbi Sacks, February 9, 2022.

Sacks, Jonathan. *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility.* Bloomsbury, 2013.

Sobrino, Jon. *Jesus the Liberator*. Burns and O., 1993.

Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

Wiesel, Elie. *The Trial of God*. New York: Random House, 1979.

[1] This article has been adapted from a paper I wrote for the course “God and Humanity in Catholic Thought” in the Spring of 2022 at Princeton University. I would like to thank the professor of that course, Daniel Rubio, for his instruction and his comments on this paper, as well as my parents, Ronda and Dan Arking, and Esther Levy, who read drafts of this paper.

[2] Korn, Eugene. *To Be a Holy People: Jewish Tradition and Ethical Values*. Urim Publications, 2021.

[3] *Ibid*., 103–125.

[4] Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Sotah* 14a.

[5] In the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15: 1–19, recited daily in the Jewish liturgy.

[6] Eliezer Berkovits. “The Nature and Function of Jewish Law.” *Not in Heaven*, Shalem Press, 2010, pp. 3–70. Quoted in my own work, “Halakhic Response to Meta-Halakhic Values,” *Conversations* issue 39, Spring 2022 pp. 76–89. That work goes in depth into how and in what cases arguments from morality drive practical halakha (Jewish law).

[7] Professor Daniel Rubio pointed out to me that this dilemma could also be approached by attributing mistakes to the biblical authors, who are not correctly communicating God’s will. However, if this is the case, we still have a problem of establishing criteria for which passages to read as properly divine and authoritative and which to read as mistakes. This process also could not just be one of discounting as divine all passages that challenge one’s established moral beliefs without running into the problem of reading the text with integrity on its own terms. While intellectually one may be open to the possibility of errors in scripture, I am not sure this is a viable path for many religious readers of the text who understand the text’s authority as dependent on its status as divine revelation.

[8] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1971. The key difference between what I am proposing and actual reflective equilibrium is that this is not a closed system. While the biblical text may inform the principles the reader uses, these too need to be rejected or accepted on the basis of moral evaluation.

[9] Plaskow, Judith. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*. San Francisco,

CA: Harper & Row, 1990.

[10] *Ibid*., 13.

[11] Plaskow is explicitly calling out some teachings of the biblical text itself as immoral and unworthy of being replicated, not merely commenting on interpretations of the text. Of course, one might think of all work within the text as “interpretation” and thus accept Plaskow’s general critique that the Bible “seems” to endorse patriarchy and has been interpreted that way, but that this is a feature not intrinsic to the text. I am not considering the possibility of a fully subjective approach to text in this article.

[12] Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, 33. Torah here is being used not just to mean the five books of Moses, but also "in the broader sense of Jewish teaching."

[13] At this point in the article, I am assuming that, even upon a turn to the text, it is not found to be morally perfect. This is not necessarily so, and the remainder of the article thus loses a significant aspect of its weight to the reader who insists that even upon subjecting their sacred text to an external standard of morality it retains its claim to moral perfection.

[14] I found mention of this source in London, Daniel DeForest. "Judging God: Learning from the Jewish Tradition of Protest against God." *Journal of Comparative Theology*. Harvard Divinity School, June 2, 2016.

[15] London, "Judging God: Learning from the Jewish Tradition of Protest against God."

[16] Often understood as a statement of God's omniscience and knowledge even of people's inner thoughts. Carasik, Michael. "The Limits of Omniscience." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 2 (2000): 221–232.

[17] *Ibid*., 223.

[18] Genesis, 18:25.

[19] Genesis, 18:19.

[20] Sacks, Jonathan. "Covenant & Conversation: Lech Lecha: A Palace in Flames."

[21] Muffs, Yochanan. "Who Will Stand in the Breach?: A Study of Prophetic Intercession." In *Love*

& Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel, 9–48. New York, NY: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992, 9. I first came across the work of Muffs in London.

[22] "Lurianic Kabbala." Encyclopædia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lurianic-Kabbala

[23] "Isaac ben Solomon Luria." Encyclopædia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Isaac-ben-Solomon-Luria and Magid, Shaul. *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala.* Indiana University Press, 2008.

[24] Sacks sometimes appeals to kabbalistic notions, such as *tzimtzum* and *tikkun*, but explicitly appropriates them for non-metaphysical uses.

[25] Sacks, Jonathan. *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. Bloomsbury, 2013, 195.