DID YAHWEH PROMOTE GENOCIDE?

Nil Guillemette, S.J.

Anyone reading the historical books of the Old Testament will soon come across passages where the wholesale massacre of entire populations, including the slaughter of women and children, seems to be commanded or at least approved by God. Perhaps such passages were not felt to be particularly offensive in centuries past, when mass murder was considered an inevitable by-product of war. But, since then, modern international law has formulated clear stipulations aimed at protecting the lives of the noncombatant; moreover, the horrendous tragedy of the Holocaust has made us sensitive to the fate of all those who perish as the innocent victims of indiscriminate extermination. Because of this, the biblical instances of generalized slaughter have become a veritable source of scandal for anyone who has the courage to read these texts thoughtfully instead of bypassing them with the vague feeling of being dishonest about something important.

Yet, whatever our attitude on this issue, the problem remains: how do we deal with these texts? Are we to excise them from our Bibles as unworthy of God and beyond the purview of divine inspiration? Or are we to try to find some sort of rational justification for God's behavior, somehow explaining it away and thus excusing the inexcusable? Or again, could we discover an altogether different approach, one which would remove God entirely from the problem and thus exonerate him of any wrongdoing whatsoever in connection with these unholy massacres? The following pages will attempt to deal with this troublesome issue.
In the first part of this study we will examine the facts as we find them in the Bible and the various extra-biblical sources. Then, in the second and third parts we will survey briefly the various interpretations offered to alleviate the scandal of the biblical mass murders, rejecting the traditional approaches and suggesting a somewhat novel one. Finally, in the last section we will try to show very tentatively that the favored solution does not conflict with a renewed understanding of biblical inspiration and biblical truth.

I. BIBLICAL AND EXTRA-BIBLICAL DATA

In a famous Northwest-Semitic inscription called the “Moabite Stone” dating from the ninth century B.C., we read the account that Mesha, the King of Moab (cf. 2 Kgs 3:4), gives of his treatment of Ataroth, a town of Israel he had conquered.

But I fought against the town and took it and slew all the people of the town as satiation (intoxication) for Chemosh and Moab.

In other words, this king massacred the whole population of a town as an offering of gratitude to his god Chemosh who, Mesha states earlier, “saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries.” After his account of the slaughter of the population of Ataroth, king Mesha continues:

And Chemosh said to me, ‘Go, take Nebo from Israel!’ So I went by night and fought against it from the break of dawn until noon, taking it and slaying all, seven thousand men, boys, women, girls and maid-servants, for I had devoted them to destruction for (the god) Ashtar-Chemosh. And I took from there the ( . . . ) of Yahweh, dragging them before Chemosh. And the king of Israel had built Jahaz, and he dwelt there while he was fighting against me, but Chemosh drove him out before me.1

I quoted this inscription at some length because it is quite

representative of the ancient Semitic mentality. For indeed, this king Mesha is not only a Semite, but his dialect is extremely close to biblical Hebrew. Now this Semite thinks like a man of his cultural milieu. For instance, he believes that his military successes or failures depend on whether his god Chemosh is angry with his land or on the contrary pleased with it. In the past forty years, Mesha tells us elsewhere in his inscription, his god was angry with Moab and allowed it to be conquered by the Israelites. But now Chemosh has relented and has granted Mesha important victories over all his enemies. In gratitude, Mesha "consecrated to destruction" (or "placed under the ban" in Biblical parlance, or "declared anathema" or "caused to be ḫerem") the entire people of Ataroth and Nebo. Incidentally, we know from other sources that this same Mesha on another occasion offered his son in sacrifice to Chemosh — a practice well known in Israel (see, e.g., 2 Kgs 16:3) — so as to obtain a victory at Kir-hareseth (cf. 2 Kgs 3:27).

All of this, as one critic says, "reads very much like some parts of the Hebrew Bible."² Something not too surprising for, as Roland de Vaux warns us, "among all the peoples of antiquity, war was linked with religion. It was begun at the command of the gods, or at least with their approval, manifested by omens; it was accompanied by sacrifices and conducted with the help of the gods who ensured victory, for which they were thanked by an offering of the part of the booty." And this latter custom, as we have seen in the case of king Mesha of Moab, consisted in exterminating the entire enemy population in the sanctuary of his god Chemosh. "In antiquity," de Vaux concludes, "every war was a holy war, in a broad sense."³

This can be confirmed in many ways. For instance, apart from the case of the Moabite king Mesha just mentioned, we know also from 2 Kgs 19:11 = Is 37:11 that the Assyrians, too, imposed the ban of extermination on their enemies, as also probably (at

least according to 2 Chr 20:23) the Ammonites.4

Perhaps this explains why, apart from religious consecration and taboo, the wars carried out in the ancient Near East tended to be wars of extermination. Of this we have many testimonies in letters from Mari, from Egypt, etc.5 But the wholesale slaughter of entire enemy populations was not limited to the ancient Near East. As Kaufmann Kohler specifies, “the practice of devoting to the Deity the spoils of war, persons or things, [was] found among all ancient nations and primitive tribes.”6 In fact, according to Haim Cohn, classical writers provide analogies of ḫerem from the practice of the Celts (Diodorus 5:32), Gauls (Caesar, De Bello Gallico 6:17), Teutons (Tacitus, Annals 13:57), and early Romans (Livy 8:9).7

Like all its neighbors, therefore, when Israel took up arms, it was convinced that it was waging the wars of Yahweh (1 Sm 18:17; 25:28), that its enemies were Yahweh’s enemies (Jgs 5:31; 1 Sm 30:26; cf. Ex 17:16). A sacrifice was offered to Yahweh before attacking (1 Sm 7:9; 13:9.12) and naturally Yahweh was “consulted” (Jgs 20:23:28; 1 Sm 14:37; 23:2.4) by means of the ephod; and the sacred lots (1 Sm 23:9-10; 30:7-8), and he decided when to attack, himself “marching” at the head of the army (Jgs 4:14; 2 Sm 5:24). Because of these rites, the combatants were assured of victory, since “Yahweh had already given the enemy into their hands” (Jos 6:2; 8:1.18; Jgs 3:28; 4:7; 7:9.15; 1 Sm 23:4; 24:5; etc.) and would fight with them during the battle (Jos 10:14.42; Jgs 20:35). Consequently, the victory was his, and the act of consecrating to him the fruits of his victory (by the total annihilation of his enemies) was an act of justice as much as an expression of gratitude.

Such was the religious and cultural context of the practice of the *ḥerem* or *ban* in Israel. And, let us not forget it, as W. F. Albright points out, "the practice of devoting a recalcitrant foe to destruction as a kind of gigantic holocaust to the national deity was apparently universal among the early Semites." 8

In the Old Testament this practice is well attested. The root *ḥrm* is found approximately 80 times in the Massoretic text. If we count the doubtful reading of Jer 25:9 as original, we have the verb used 51 times, and the noun 29 times. 9 Occasionally, some of these uses refer simply to any form of "separation" from the sphere of the profane. 10 But most of the uses appear primarily in the context of war and extermination. The main texts are as follows: three passages which speak of "ban" without specifically mentioning an actual massacre (Nm 21:1-3; Dt 7:1-5; Jgs 1:17), but many other passages which explicitly mention the practice of the large-scale massacre of entire populations (Dt 2:26-36; 3:1-7; 13:13-19; 20:16-18; Jos 6:17-21; 8:24-27; 10:28-40; 1 Sm 15:1-9; there are also many similar passages in the prophetic literature). Of all these texts Jos 10:28-40 is the most graphic and emphatic. Incidentally, the word *ḥerem* does not appear in Ugaritic, but it does appear in all the other Semitic languages. 11

Naturally, even though the texts themselves are clear as to their meaning, they do not necessarily refer to actual historical events. In fact, as Norbert Lohfink points out, "the Old Testament does not contain a single text from which we might derive trustworthy information about an Israelite *ḥerem* for any period of Israel’s history." 12 This is due to the fact that many narratives of these holy wars are merely secondary etiologies, theological systematizations (v.g. deuteronomic rewriting), or historically late accounts influenced by added legends. Nevertheless, be that as it may, the fact remains that the Bible often describes the mass

9. More details concerning these figures can be found in Lohfink, "ḥaram, ḥerem," 181.
extermination of various civilian populations and presents these atrocities as being ordered by God (v.g. Jos 10:28-40; 1 Sm 15:1-9) or at least condoned by Him. Hence, for us who have been taught that God is essentially a God of love (1 Jn 4:8), the scandal mentioned at the beginning of this study.

II. VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

In order to remove the scandal, or at least to reduce it as much as possible, many interpretations of the offensive passages have been proposed over the centuries. We will see what seems to me to be the most important or often-recurring ones. For the sake of clarity, they will be presented by groups of affinity.

1. Historical-critical approach. A first group removes the scandal by a procedure which amounts to radical surgery. For lack of a better term I call this approach “historical-critical” because it appeals to the findings of the historical disciplines (especially archaeology) as well as to a close analysis of the biblical text itself. The supporters of this approach fall in two sub-groups.

a) The first of these states in effect something like this: the ban should not be a cause of scandal for the simple reason that *it never happened!* And here they point out to what every student of ancient Near Eastern archaeology knows, namely, that the diggings undertaken at Jericho, Ai and Azor do not support the story of a militant conquest of Palestine by the Israelites. True, they do not prove either that the biblical narratives are merely imaginative, without any historical value; but they certainly reveal that, if ever there was an Israelite conquest, it left no traces at the relevant sites. For indeed, as far as we can tell, Jericho and Ai were uninhabited at the Late Bronze Age. In fact, most critics say that the so-called Israelite conquest was a nonevent: far from being a military invasion, it was rather a slow and peaceful process of gradual settlement. Consequently, all those stories of massacre were imaginative reconstructions based on garbled local legends and filled out with theological reflections. In short, the ban was actually never carried out and the laws proclaiming it operated in a vacuum.¹³

13. Various authors formulate this historical-critical interpretation in a descrip-
This interpretation of the biblical facts is open to two main objections. First, it is built essentially on an argument *ex silentio*, namely, that history and its cognate disciplines (archaeology, epigraphy, paleography, etc.) *suggest* that the ban never took place; but they actually cannot *prove* at this stage that it never did. Secondly, and more importantly, whether the ban occurred or not is really irrelevant to the whole issue because, as John L. McKenzie writes with his usual vigor, “the ban is proposed as a moral ideal. (. . .) This is the way in which the finished narrative thought of God as acting, or the way in which the Israelites thought God should have acted.”¹⁴ Furthermore, it is clear that the writers of the biblical narratives intended to convey to us the impression that the wars of conquest with their horrors were real and, as Peter Craigie rightly concludes, “in the last resort it is the written word, rather than the historically vague event behind the word, which constitutes Holy Scripture.”¹⁵ In other words, these questions of historical accuracy concerning the execution of the ban, in the opinion of Jean Levine, “do not alter the fact that the inspired author lays the responsibility for the ban on Yahweh himself.”¹⁶ And this is the problem from the point of view of inspiration and the moral values of the Old Testament.”¹⁷

b) Another sub-group of the historical-critical approach uses...
another tack. They do not deny the historical reality of the ban as such, but they deny that it originated from God historically. Few authors to my knowledge have proposed this thesis. We have it formulated in a dictionary entry by C. Brekelmans in these terms:

Did God command the war ban? In Dt (and Jos) it is the lawgiver and in 1 Sm 5 and 1 Kgs 20:42 it is a prophet who demands it. Both appear in the name of Yahweh, by whose power, they have been sent. But this does not mean that everything that they command or demand must be ascribed directly to Yahweh. They remain men of their age who shared its conceptions; consequently as divine emissaries they could often demand certain measures which to them were entirely natural, but which are altogether foreign to us. This God permitted. 18

As can be seen, whereas the preceding group of scholars endeavored to remove the scandal of the ban by insisting that it simply never happened, this group says in effect: if it ever happened, it did not come from God.

Two objections can be raised against this thesis. First, it is no doubt true that, in most of the relevant biblical passages, the injunction for the execution of the ban emanates from human agents, not directly from God. And this fact, as we shall see later on, is extremely revealing in itself; in truth, it will provide us with a decisive clue as to how we should read our passages. However, not all the scandalous passages fit the description given by Brekelmans. Despite his assertion to the contrary, 1 Sm 15 clearly presents God as the instigator of the ban (see verse 2: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I will punish . . .’”). Likewise Jos 8:27 and 10:40 clearly ascribe the execution of the ban to

18. Cf. Christian Brekelmans, M.S.F., “Ban,” in Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible, ed. A. van den Born (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963) cols. 195-96, at col. 196. In all fairness, however, it must be noted that Brekelmans himself is unambiguous in his position, for indeed the second part of this quotation (“Both appear in the name of Yahweh . . .”) seems to suggest an entirely different direction of thought. This same author has also written on the theme, “Le Ḥerem chez les Prophètes du royaume du nord et dans le Deutéronome,” Sacra Pagina (collective work). (Paris: Gabalda, 1959) 1:377-83. This latter contribution, however, is not directly useful for our purpose.
a direct command of God. And so, at least in these three cases, the order to carry out the ban seems to emanate directly from God. Directly? Well, not exactly (and, again, this fact itself will prove very revealing later on), since in these cases the order is actually conveyed through human intermediaries.

A second objection is of a more general character. Even if we did not have the three texts just referred to, where God is explicitly given as the originator of the ban (and where the originator is not merely a lawgiver or a prophet speaking without any reference to God), nevertheless the fact remains that in their present tenor all the other relevant texts leave no doubt as to the intention of their authors, who obviously meant to tell us that God was the originator of the ban, whatever way you looked at it. For indeed, Moses or Joshua or the anonymous lawgiver of Deuteronomy, these biblical writers would say, were merely transmitting God’s will to his people. And so, in the light of these considerations, it cannot be said upon a careful examination of our sources that the ban did not come from God; if we take those sources at face value, as do the supporters of this thesis, then their reading is simply inaccurate and their thesis is contradicted by the very texts they invoke to defend it.

2. Apologetical approach. In view of what has just been said concerning the weakness of the historical-critical approach, many scholars give up any attempt at disproving the existence of the ban or its ascription to God, since this seems rather problematic. Instead, they try to show that, under the circumstances, it was inevitable that the ban should exist, and furthermore that we should not be unduly scandalized over the matter. In other words, while the first approach aimed at ensuring that the case against God be dismissed from lack of evidence (i.e., there was no ban or the ban was not ordered by God), this second approach admits the facts of the case, but pleads for an acquittal of the accused on the grounds of extenuating circumstances. Like the first approach already studied, this one is factual in the sense that it accepts the biblical texts at face value, it takes their content literally. Also like the first approach, this one comprises various sub-groups, albeit with some overlapping among them.

a) A first sub-group of critics points out that the ban was practiced only during the very first stages of Israel’s conquest
of Palestine, and that except in 1 Kgs 20:42 (where an anonymous prophet demands that it be carried out) after Saul it is no longer heard of. 19 Other authors also add that the actual instances when the ban was carried out were so few that one cannot assume they were the rule of ancient Israelite warfare. 20 Often enough statements such as these are not developed, and the reader is led to suppose that in the eyes of these authors such special circumstances (i.e. antiquity and rarity of the ban) somewhat mitigate the gravity of the deed, and therefore exonerate God, as it were. Naturally this is not stated in so many words, but it is tacitly implied.

Not much reflection is needed to perceive the inadequacy of this line of defence. A foul deed is not rendered less foul because it was done a long time ago and only a few times. If God is the originator of the ban in any real sense of the term, then he is accountable for it regardless of questions of date or frequency. And considerations such as these, while somewhat lessening our sense of moral outrage, in no way eliminate it. A Holocaust perpetrated fifty years ago or five hundred years ago is still a moral horror, just as "ethnic cleansing" is an appalling abomination whether executed a few times or a hundred times. The dating or the frequency of an action does not change its moral character.

b) Another line of defence (of God's blamelessness in ordering the ban) is somewhat similar. It consists in underscoring the fact that the ban was practiced in Israel at a time when the Chosen People was still in its infancy. As A. R. S. Kennedy puts it, "the ban was thus the outcome of religious zeal in an age when the moral sense was less advanced than the religious." 21 In the same vein John L. McKenzie explains that "the practice of the ban, like a number of other features of ancient Hebrew law and custom, is a survival from primitive and more barbarous times which finally disappeared with the growth of a more enlightened morality and a more civilized manner of life." 22

19. Thus Brekelmans, "Ban," col. 196; Albright, From the Stone Age, 214.
20. See, for example, Cohn, "herem," col. 347.
After having said this, however, McKenzie hastens to add that, although these mass murders were done in good faith (i.e., the Israelites sincerely believed that the ban was pleasing to God), nevertheless “they cannot be justified morally.” Unfortunately, not all the scholars who mention Israel’s low level of moral understanding at the time of the conquest, are as explicit as McKenzie in condemning the ban as morally unjustifiable. On the contrary, they often give the impression that the ban was somewhat justifiable in the circumstances.  This notion, of course, meets with the same difficulty as some of the other interpretations previously surveyed: our sources ascribe the ban to God, for it is he who wills it and commands its execution. And so, whether the agents of his decision are civilized or barbarian is completely irrelevant to the issue at hand. If the ban is a moral abomination and God initiates it, then the scandal remains.

c) Another version of this line of interpretation attempts to remove the scandal by insisting that God had no choice in the matter: if he wished to reveal himself to humankind at an early stage of the latter’s moral and spiritual development (and in the process preparing a people “so that one day it might give birth to our Savior,” then perforce he had to accept Israel as it was then, a people who practiced the ban as a matter of course in the context of the holy war (i.e., as an act of obedience and gratitude pleasing to God) and therefore in perfect good faith. This “adaptation” of God was a necessary act of condescension on God’s part in view of Israel’s ethical grossness. Incidentally, this idea of a divine act of condescension (in Greek sunkatabasis) and its applications are found, as demonstrated many years ago by Henri Pinard de la Boullaye, in the earliest Fathers of the Church: Justin, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, etc. As an analogy of this divine way of proceeding, we can think of the way God “tolerates” many morally repre-

23. Cohn ("herem," col. 347) writes that, given the religious grounding of the holy war in Israel, “it was therefore natural to regard the enemy as herem and his destruction as an act of devotion to God.” My emphasis.
hensible actions in a sinner who is gradually emerging from a
sinful past and gropingly tries to progress towards greater moral
sensitivity.

Again, such a line of defence would be acceptable if in the
Bible the Israelites themselves were presented as carrying out
the ban on their own initiative. Then indeed, it could conceivably
be maintained that God would tolerate the practice of the ban
for a short while. But the case of the matter is entirely different
if the ban is presented as positively willed and even commanded
by God. Because, then, no amount of “adaptation” or “conde-
sension” would warrant an explicit order to massacre another
nation. To tolerate evil is one thing, to generate it is another.
For example, if we revert to the analogy of the converting sinner,
we can understand that God tolerates the sinner’s moral weak-
nesses, but we would not countenance an order from God that
this sinner should go and butcher his neighbor’s wife and
children.

d) A common variant of the “condescension” thesis runs
somewhat on parallel lines and goes like this: since the ban was
practiced by every one of Israel’s neighbors at the time of the
conquest, and that it was, in the words of Kaufmann Kohler,
“inseparably connected with the idea of a holy warfare,” it is
doubtful that Israel could have avoided being completely con-
ditioned sociologically and culturally by this massive influence.26
In this respect Israel had to practice the ban and God had to
accept Israel on these terms.27

Here two objections can be made to this point of view. First,
even though Israel was under the same kind of pressure from
its neighbors in the area of, say, polytheism or human sacrifices,
still we never see God condoning these practices in any way
whatsoever. On the contrary, from the very beginning of his
relationship with Israel as a people chosen by him, God
emphatically forbids idolatry and human sacrifices. And so, since
he certainly rejects any form of so-called “sociological condition-
ing” in these instances, why would he have to do so for the
ban? Secondly, as we have already seen more than once, God

27. See in the first part of this study the data presented, and notably the
testimonies of Kennedy and Cohn.
in the Bible is presented as ordering the ban, not merely as tolerating it. So the difficulty remains.

e) Another line of thought, which bases itself on several biblical passage (v.g. Dt 7:1-4; 20:16-18; etc.), defends the ban as a necessary evil for the times. In this view the ban “becomes an instrument for the preservation of the purity of religion,” as one critic writes.28 In other words, by exterminating all the idolatrous peoples surrounding itself, Israel was merely taking preventive measures to forestall any danger of being gradually enticed into idolatry or syncretism.

The obvious objection to this attempt at upholding the “necessity” of the ban is quite simply that the end does not justify the means. It is unthinkable that God would ensure the monotheism of his people by resorting to mass murder. After all, if Israel is God’s people, the other surrounding peoples are also his beloved creatures, his own peoples. As Isaiah says in a remarkable passage: “In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage’” (Is 19:24-25).

f) Finally, a similar mode of reasoning tries to justify the ban on the grounds that it was a divine punishment against certain crimes. E. Galbiati and A. Piazza have this to say on the topic:

By ordering the herem — we are dealing here with an order and not with a mere counsel — God was exercising his right over human life, although adapting himself to the customs of the time. The reasons for such a procedure are given by God himself. Above all the Canaanites have deserved to be punished in this fashion for their crimes; the Hebrews were only the instruments of the divine punishment.29

Two objections come to mind against this opinion. First, as stated previously the end does not justify the means: God is

28. See Brekelmans, “Ban,” col. 196. This author merely enunciates this well-known thesis, but without embracing it.

certainly not morally excusable in annihilating entire populations for a good end, whatever that end might be. Secondly, as for the notion that in so doing God was merely exercising his right over human life, the least that can be said about it is that a God who would exercise his "right" with such cruelty could hardly be called moral in any meaningful sense of the term. Besides, as some authors have pointed out, did not the victims of the ban also have the "right" to defend themselves when their lives were threatened, even if that meant fighting against God? Obviously, if we pursued this line of thought, we would soon find ourselves inextricably caught in scholastic casuistry about primary and secondary rights, direct and indirect causality, etc. In other words, even if we were successful in "exonerating" God by use of this type of subtle ratiocination, the element of scandal would still be lurking in the back of our minds, no doubt because very few of us would find acceptable the notion of a God having the right to kill innocent children.

In conclusion, it seems that none of the preceding interpretations (the ones usually put forth in textbooks and which on that account we could call "traditional") is really satisfactory. Hence the advisability of using an altogether different approach.

III. A TENTATIVE SOLUTION

The previous interpretations of the ban as a theological-moral problem all had in common that they were based on a literal understanding of the biblical text. In other words, they took the statements of the biblical authors and of the biblical characters at face value, they assumed that these statements referred to objective events taking place in history. This means that, for instance, if Joshua or Samuel said, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Exterminate the Midianites'," then the implied reality was that God was in effect ordering the actual massacre of the Midianites. All the preceding interpretations took for granted that such assertions in the mouth of Joshua or Samuel or any other representative of Yahweh were literally true and reflected realistically what was happening in the realm of historical facts. Now these approaches, as we have seen, did not succeed in eliminating the scandal of the ban. And so, another way of understanding
the Bible text seems necessary if we are to make sense of these disturbing passages of Scripture.

I will attempt to present here just such an approach, which I will call the *literary* approach, and which consists basically in transposing the scandalizing texts in a completely different key, one which will take into account the particular literary genre of these texts. Needless to say, in case the reader would take alarm at the prospect of too much novelty, I am not the creator of this approach. I have simply noticed that it was hinted at or sketched out briefly in a few scattered remarks found in a handful of writers. And here I am merely attempting to articulate and somewhat systematize a bit more this scanty material.

However, before going on to the heart of the matter, I would like to refer summarily to a conversation I had recently. This intentional digression will serve as a kind of “nutshell advance notice” of what I want to say in the rest of this section.

A young man whom I had never met came to see me about my books of short stories, over which he was ebulliently enthusiastic. In fact this young man (let us call him Frank) was overflowing with religious fervor. He was a Charismatic, as they say, a person involved in charismatic prayer groups. This last activity probably intensified the natural fire of his temperament. Anyhow, in the course of our conversation Frank shared with me some of his many religious experiences, as well as the various circumstances which had brought him to engage in these experiences. And every now and then, Frank would say, “Then God told me to do this,” or “But God didn’t want me to go on with that,” or God-something-else. Since I could not help but smile a little every time Frank used these expressions, he finally noticed my reaction and volunteered to explain what he meant by them. Now it turned out that these formulas were merely a kind of spiritual short-hand (well known and well practiced among many Charismatics) for something like this: he had experienced a strong attraction or repugnance for a given course of action, had prayed over it, felt that an “answer” had been given to him (either an inner “voice” telling him what to do, or simply an inclination to do this or that accompanied with great peace), applied the rules of discernment of spirits (cf. the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius), sought a confirmation of the divine
will by evaluating the long-term fruits of his decision, etc. And so, looking back at the various turning points of his life when he had sought the will of God in this complex fashion, Frank could in retrospect conclude that at the time “God told him to do this or that.” In other words, his odd formula “God told me” somehow condensed and summarized a complex psycho-spiritual process.

Naturally a process like that is not guaranteed to be infallible. And Frank, who seemed to be remarkably astute and wise for his age, was well aware of this. He expressly confided at one point that, when he said "God told me to do this or that," he was only hoping to have discovered God’s will for him in a concrete situation, and that in spite of his sincere dispositions he could very well be merely projecting his own wishful thinking into the situation. In confirmation of this, I was reminded of the story of the three girls who were convinced that God had told them they should marry a certain young man of their acquaintance; but the young man in question happened to be the same one for all three of them!

Bearing in mind these modern cases of "God-told-me" experiences, now we are perhaps in a better position to understand what could likely have happened in some cases at least of "God-told-me" experiences as we find them in the narratives of the Bible.

Of course such an enquiry raises the whole question of the manner in which God communicates with humans in the Bible. And this is an extremely difficult topic, first because everything involving God is necessarily mysterious of its very nature, and also because our sole access to those remote events is through the archaic testimonies of the biblical accounts. In these circumstances, therefore, we can only make an educated guess as to what really happened when in a narrative someone is said to have received a communication from God.

For some of these communications, the interested party himself tells us the manner in which God spoke to him. For instance, the communication occurred during a theophany (v.g. the vision of the burning bush in Ex 3) or during a dream (v.g. Jacob’s ladder in Gn 28). But, most of the time, the biblical narrator merely states that “God spoke to Moses,” or “Yahweh
said to Joshua, "without specifying the way by which the communication was made. We are left to guess by ourselves what exactly took place.

Now in this connection I would like to point out two striking features of the divine communications which might help our guess work. The first of these features is this: nowhere in the Old Testament (as far as I know) do we see God speaking directly to a group of people. What we see, rather, is God speaking to a group through an intermediary. In other words, even when God addresses a group (v.g. the nation of Israel), he always actually speaks to one single person at a time. This fact, I submit, might well suggest the type of communication that we are dealing with in the Bible, namely, a communication which is by its very nature personal (only one individual at a time is involved) or even — dare we say? — subjective. If that is the case, it is easy to see how such a communication, which is in a sense quite similar to young Frank’s “God-told-me” experiences, can also be affected by a certain degree of interpretation, wishful thinking, involuntary distortions . . .

The second feature I wish to point out is the fact that the communications of God which are described as happening during a theophany or in a dream (in other words those communications which have a distinct setting and are in a sense “characterized” by that setting) tend to be rather concise in form. On the other hand, some at least of the “characterless” communications can be very long and rambling, so much so that it becomes difficult to imagine God being such a talker! For instance, the communication entitled in the Jerusalem Bible “The Book of the Covenant” runs for some 105 verses (Ex 20:22-23:23), and the instructions regarding the building of the sanctuary and its ministers occupy some 241 verses (Ex 25:1-31:17). Now these communications, the experts tell us, are not all direct communications between God and Moses, even though they begin with the words “Yahweh said to Moses” and use the direct speech throughout. As John L. McKenzie writes in the recent New Jerome Biblical Commentary, “The Pentateuch in Exodus through Deuteronomy contains vast collections of laws. Critics now recognize that these laws come from diverse origins and dates;
very few of the laws can be attributed to Moses himself . . .”
And yet, these laws are retrojected back to Moses’ time and, even more daringly, are directly attributed to God by use of the formula “God said to Moses.” In short, we are dealing here with a quite specific literary device by which something which is understood (rightly or wrongly) as being the will of God (v.g. ancient sacred traditions, liturgical customs, basic laws) is placed in the mouth of God and communicated to a representative of God in the course of an alleged revelatory discourse. Now this literary phenomenon might be a bit surprising to some of us, but it is quite well known to any student of the Old Testament world.

If we turn, then, to the question of the ban, we can easily surmise that actually God never commanded the slaughter of thousands of defenceless women and innocent babies, but rather that his representatives, honestly convinced that the ban was pleasing to God (in the thirteenth century B.C. all the peoples surrounding Israel were convinced of this, let us not forget), projected their convictions in the form of “God-says” communications in which God is presented as ordering the ban. This is a reasonable hypothesis already proposed by many authors, although to my knowledge it has been made only in passing, without attempting to justify it systematically. With the following remarks I do not claim to remedy this situation, far from it; I will merely suggest an outline of argumentation for someone who, being more competent than I am in this field, might one day wish to undertake a full-scale study of this question.

a) My first argument is my weakest one. It is an appeal to authority, the authority of the experts. It consists merely in pointing out that many respected scholars believe that the ban is not to be ascribed to God. Such is the opinion, among others, of André Gelin, Jean Levie, Heinz Kruse, Joseph

Blenkinsopp, Bernard Hurault, Christian Brekelmans, etc.

b) That "God-says" texts constitute a distinct literary genre in the Bible is not a figment of one’s imagination. We find such texts everywhere in the various Semitic literatures. How else, indeed, could a king, a lawgiver or a sage confer unquestionable authority to his utterances, if not by imputing them to the Deity itself? This was an easy thing to do, because the decisions of the gods were usually communicated through oracles purported to express the gods' wishes. Now such oracles, of course, could be manipulated in any given direction (consciously or not) in view of their inherent obscurity or ambiguity. Hence the constant reference to these oracles in the relevant literatures.

Thus, if we examine from this angle the various Babylonian and Assyrian historical texts, we find many times that it is said of a king that he went to war "encouraged by an oracle given by" such and such a god or goddess (v.g. Ashur, Chemosh, Ishtar). These texts often speak of a "command" given by the god/goddess through "trust-inspiring oracles." Often the compound expression "oracle-command" is used. This process is well described by Peter C. Craigie, who is referring here to the conduct of war in the ancient Near East:

In addition to consulting the omens, the King would endeavor to receive oracles from the gods (principally Ashur, the national god of Assyria, and Ishtar, a goddess who included war among her various activities). The oracles would be delivered to the king by oracular priests or priestesses, but in form the oracle would be expressed as the actual words of the god or goddess. 

Of this divine communication in direct discourse we have a clear example in line 32 of the Mesha Stone referred to in the

28 (1950) 77-88, esp. 84.
35. This author is the editor of the recently published Christian Community Bible (Manila: Claretians—St. Paul—Divine Word, 1988). See in particular his commentaries on Gn 16 (p. 66) and Jos 6 (p. 276).
first part of this study. There king Mesha “quotes” his god verbatim: “Chemosh said to me: ‘Go down and fight against Horonin!’”

Now we have the same phenomenon in Israel, described in these words by Roland de Vaux, in reference this time to everyday life:

In ancient Israel man went to a sanctuary ‘to consult Yahweh’, and the priest gave oracles. It is noteworthy that in Dt 33:8-10 the role played by the sons of Levi in giving oracles is mentioned even before the teaching of the Torah and their service of the altar. In the desert the Israelites turned to Moses ‘to consult God’ (Ex 18:15). (...) Anyone who wanted ‘to consult Yahweh’ went to the tent; Moses then went inside, alone, and conversed face to face with Yahweh (Ex 33:7-11). This last action, however, was a personal privilege of Moses (Nm 12:6-8) which the priests did not share (cf. Nm 27:21). They used to consult God by means of the ephod and of the Urim and Thummin.39

In this context we can better understand the meaning of at least some of “God says” formulas scattered throughout the Old Testament. As Bernard Hurault explains:

When we read: Yahweh ordered Joshua the anathema, we should not think this was a special intervention of God. (...) These words only mean that Joshua, influenced by the mentality of his own times, decided to declare and implement the anathema, and in so doing preserved Israel’s faith from idolatry, a situation even more contradictory to God’s plans. But they said this as a people who did not yet know the value of human life.40

In a similar vein Jean Levie writes of the ban and of the holy wars that they were

human interpretations of Yahweh’s will. (...) The nation is in the hands of Yahweh and is led by Yahweh; the people and the writers who give expression to the people’s thoughts attribute to Yahweh the initiative in the nation’s collective acts. In a number of cases,

it is a type of 'literary form' to attribute such acts to Yahweh. \(41\)

Let us conclude this second argument with a last testimony, this one from Christian Brekelmans:

Did God command the war ban? In Dt (and Jos) it is the lawgiver, and in 1 Sam 15 and 1 Kgs 20:42 it is a prophet who demands it. Both appear in the name of Yahweh, by whose power they have been sent. But this does not mean that everything that they command or demand must be ascribed directly to Yahweh. They remain men of their age who shared its conceptions; consequently as divine emissaries they could often demand certain measures which to them were entirely natural, but which are altogether foreign to us. This God permitted. \(42\)

In other words, as men of their times these official representatives of God honestly thought that their own religious convictions reflected God’s mind. For instance, in reference to the ban Samuel or Joshua interpreted God’s will in keeping with his religious-cultural conditioning. Like all his contemporaries, he supposed in good faith that the mass murder of Israel’s enemies was pleasing to God. And so, he attributed to God what came only from himself. Thus, when Samuel commands to Saul: “God says, ‘Destroy the Amalekites’,“ all the time it is only he who is speaking from his own point of view, not God.

c) We find a confirmation of this interpretation in a cultural trait which characterizes Israel’s (and many ancient civilizations’) religiosity. Here again Bernard Hurault strikes the right chord:

We cannot . . . take literally all that is said about visions or words received from God because ancient peoples did not express themselves the way we do. When a man was reflecting or was tempted by evil, they sometimes expressed this inner meditation as an inner dialogue with different characters and they would say that the devil or God dialogued with this man: see Jos 7:10 and 1 Kgs 3:4. \(43\)

This brings us back to the case of young Frank, used at the

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beginning of this part of our study: that lad, too, spontaneously used the "God-says" literary genre to express in condensed form his inner debates and the conclusions of his spiritual discernments. With some simple souls this seems to be a natural mode of expression, and it is reflected in the still unsophisticated religious literature of the kind that we find in parts of the Old Testament.

d) In ancient Israel this sort of "short circuiting" of the spiritual discernment of God's will is rendered all the more unavoidable by the fact that the Semitic mind viewed divine causality in a very simplified fashion. For indeed, while not denying the real influence of secondary causes in a given chain of events, the Semite emphasized more readily the primary cause of the chain. It is not surprising, then, that their view of the universe seems so religious in essence. Given this peculiar mentality of theirs, we do not find it strange to read in the Old Testament that "Yahweh thunders" (Ps 29:3) or that he hid Jeremiah and Baruch (Jer 36:26; but compare with 36:19) or that he dictated or even wrote (Ex 32:16) the content of the law.\(^4\) And this way of looking at things is not exclusive to Israel. We observe the same train of thought in the prelude to the Code of Hammurabi, for example. In this last instance, in order to further underline the fact that the "real" author of that famous code of law was not Hammurabi but the deity itself, the stele which contains that code pictures the sun-god Shamash presenting the king with the laws that are inscribed on the lower half of the stele.\(^5\) This, of course, is just another illustration of the type of the intellectual "short circuit" I have been describing: since Yahweh is ultimately the author of everything as primary cause, it is natural for a Semite who has not yet operated a distinction between the positive and the permissive will of God (v.g. it is God who "hardens" the heart of the Pharaoh), to say that God willed the mass slaughter of a population, especially if this population happens to be the enemy of his Chosen People!

e) Fortunately, however, we see the Biblical authors them-

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44. For this important insight in connection with the present issue, I am indebted to A. Gelin's remarkable article already quoted above. See full reference in n. 31 above.

selves evolve a more sophisticated — and a more theologically acceptable — understanding of the working out of God’s true intentions. For indeed, in at least two clear cases we observe that a later generation of biblical writers correct their predecessors in this regard: what had been attributed to God at first is judged, no doubt as the result of a better grasp of God’s holiness, to be wrongly attributed to him! And so, in this way the Bible itself corrects its own erroneous views in the matter.  

In 2 Kgs 9-10 we read about Jehu’s bloody accession to the throne of Israel. This is the occasion for a regular mobilization of the Yahwist forces: Elisha, the “fellow prophets” and the chief of the Rechabites (2 Kgs 10:15) support the conspiracy. The massacre of the family of Ahab is expressly commanded by an oracle of Yahweh (2 Kgs 9:6-10) and executed by Jehu as an act of zeal for Yahweh (2 Kgs 10:16). Yet, a century later the prophet Hosea pronounced in turn an oracle of Yahweh which solemnly protested against what had been perpetrated by Jehu (Hos 1:4-5).

Another example of biblical “correction” of a “God-says” passage is found on the occasion of the census conducted by David. In 2 Sm 24:1 we read that Yahweh inspired David with the thought of undertaking the census of Israel. Now in the mentality of the times, still very close to nomad life which valued simplicity, a census was viewed as a manifestation of “hubris” (in Greek tragedy, an excess of ambition or pride). And so, here again Yahweh seems to have inspired a sinful action, which in fact was later to be severely punished. And the narrative of the subsequent punishment is a way for the later biblical authors to “correct” the awkward theology of the Book of Samuel. Thus the redactor of Chronicles (1 Chr 21:1) ends up attributing to Satan what his predecessor had attributed to God!

These two examples are eloquent in their implications. If the Bible “corrects” itself in this fashion precisely on two occasions when the “God-says” formula is used, then there is no reason why we too should not follow suit and do exactly what the Bible does, especially when the action of God in question is morally

46. The following two examples for “corrected” theological views are given by Gelin, “Morale,” 851.
reprehensible, as the issue of the ban is for many of us. For indeed, "the idea of divinely sanctioned warfare," writes Joseph Blenkinsopp, "even wholesale slaughter of civilians, needless to say, cannot be endorsed theologically."47

f) This last consideration provides us with an added argument against the divine origin of the ban, but an argument which is a priori this time. It runs something like this. We should always hold that God is at least as good as we are. Consequently, we should reject from our notions of God whatever we cannot find possible to love, and even more so whatever seems unworthy of a human being, let alone unworthy of God. In this connection Origen in the section of his On First Principles dedicated precisely to the inspiration of Scripture and the way Scripture should be read and interpreted, raises this very point: "Moreover, even the simpler of those who claim to belong to the Church, while believing indeed that there is none greater than the Creator, in which they are right, yet believe such things about him as would not be believed of the most savage and unjust of men."48 A bit further on the same Father of the Church declares: "At other times even impossibilities are recorded in the law for the sake of the more skilful and enquiring readers, in order that these, by giving themselves to the toil of examining what is written, may gain a sound conviction of the necessity of seeking in such instances a meaning worthy of God."49

Needless to say, the practice of the ban as we find it in the Old Testament would today be condemned by the Church as an "intrinsically evil" act, since both the Second Vatican Council50 and, more recently, Pope John Paul II condemn genocide in the


49. Cf. ibid. IV,ii.9. Emphasis mine.

50. Cf. "Gaudium et Spes," no. 27: "Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide . . . all these things and others of the like are infamies indeed (. . .) they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator." Further on, the Constitution states (no. 80): "Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation." My italics.
strongest terms. Consequently, any interpretation of the Bible which would attribute the ban to a divine initiative would certainly fail in seeking "a meaning worthy of God."

g) Finally, let us remember that many other passages of the Bible, even passages found in the Old Testament itself, present a God whose character is irreconcilable with a moral horror such as the ban. Two of the passages immediately come to mind. The first is from Ezechiel: "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, says the Lord God" (Ez 18:32). The other one is from the Book of Wisdom: "You spare all things because all things are yours, Lord, lover of life . . ." (Ws 11:26).

The conclusion of all this seems inescapable: God never ordered the ban, and therefore the scandal caused by this ancient institution in Israel becomes groundless.

IV. THE BAN AND BIBLICAL INSPIRATION

The preceding conclusion immediately raises a problem. If we grant that the slaughter of entire civilian populations was never willed by God, nevertheless we still have to explain how it is possible that, in a text which is inspired by God, we should find this kind of error. And in this case we have a double error: an error of fact (the ban is wrongly ascribed to God as its originator) and an error of teaching (the ban is presented as morally acceptable, even pleasing to God).

A completely satisfactory solution to this problem is not possible, for the simple reason that we do not as yet possess a fully developed understanding of that very special supernatural phenomenon we call biblical inspiration. As Cardinal Martini remarked some years ago, the theological treatise on inspiration is "still in formation, still in the state of becoming." Consequently, I will here have to be content with submitting only a few tentative reflections on this difficult topic. These reflections will cluster around three focal points: first I will indicate what

51. Cf. Pope John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor, no. 80. This Pope quotes at length the passage of Gaudium et Spes just referred to (no. 27) and therefore includes genocide (=the Israelite ban) among those acts he considers intrinsically evil.
kind of truth can be found lacking in the Bible, then what kind of truth is always present there, and finally what form it takes.

1. Errors in the Bible. In his encyclical Providentissimus Deus of 1893, Pope Leo XIII taught that the Bible can contain errors in natural or scientific matters. In the following decades a lot of evidence was produced proving also the existence of historical errors. (At Vatican II Cardinal Koenig read off a whole list of such errors and no one contradicted him.) Nowadays critical investigations point out that biblical writers were limited not only in their knowledge of science and history, but also in their religious understanding, in other words that they had religious limitations and even that they could commit religious errors. “For instance,” Raymond E. Brown writes,

Job 14:13-22 and Sir 14:16-17; 17:22-23; 38:21 deny an afterlife. It is not that the respective authors were ignorant of the possibility of an afterlife; they brought it up as a solution and rejected it at the same time that other biblical authors were accepting it. If one accepts the afterlife teaching of Jesus (which was harmonious with Pharisaic Judaism), how does one reconcile a word of God in Job that is contradictory to a word of God spoken by Jesus? (... ) Using the best biblical methods available, scholars seek to determine what the human author meant with all his limitations. Combining this with a belief in inspiration, they recognize that there is a kenōsis involved in God’s committing His message to human words. It was not only in the career of Jesus that the divine has taken on the form of a servant (Phil 2:7). If one discovers religious errors, one does not seek to explain them away; one recognizes that God is willing to work with human beings in all their limitations.53

Another similar example of religious error is found in Ps 88. The author of this psalm believes that God remembers the dead no more and that they are cut out from his hand (v. 6; cf. 11-13). Now, in the words of Pierre Grelot,

this doctrine is obviously incorrect, if we compare it with complete revelation. But the proper grace of the psalmist is to express, in a charismatic fashion, people’s anguish at such prospects. It would

therefore be absurd to draw from his sentence a theological conclusion, as if the latter would express the message which he is commissioned to transmit. Besides, no one would dream of doing so!\textsuperscript{54}

We can see, accordingly, that in the phenomenon of biblical inspiration God takes the human characters involved, both the actors of the dramas and their authors, with all their limitations, prejudices and shortcomings. Of course we are familiar with the idea that the actors of the history of salvation would be such (from the cunning Jacob to the adulterous David), but we are not so familiar with the idea that the authors of that history would also be laboring under severe limitations. Yet they are inspired, we believe. In other words, they are motioned by God to write exactly what God wants them to write,\textsuperscript{55} so that everything they write is inspired, down to the last detail. We must not confuse, however, inspiration and revelation. If these authors are supernaturally motioned to write, they are not necessarily given at the same time a special knowledge that they did not have before. This is how John Scullion describes the process.

There is on-going revelation in the Bible from Genesis to Apocalypse. All authors and books are inspired. But not all, and at times precious little, of what a writer records has been revealed to him. Much is of purely human origin. Is the writer teaching us all these details, gory and noble, unsavory and sublime? No, not all of them. Is he recording them? Of course. It is under the direction of the Holy Spirit that all is being recorded. It is the history of God leading his chosen people to the fullness of revelation, purifying their religious ideas, elevating their moral concepts (cf. Mt 5-7; 19).\textsuperscript{56}

This last sentence can serve as a convenient formula of transition to my next point. But my first point can be summarized


\textsuperscript{55} I am here referring indirectly to the famous definition of biblical inspiration proposed by Leo XIII in \textit{Providentissimus Deus} (Dz 1952/3293) and taken up anew by Vatican II in “Dei Verbum,” no. 11.

in this way: the Bible can be found lacking in scientific truth, in historical truth (though not about the major events of the history of salvation), in religious truth — and no doubt in other kinds of truth also. However, there is one particular kind of truth that is found everywhere in the Bible, everywhere in the sense that it results from the total message of the Bible.

2. Truth in the Bible. Until Vatican II biblical scholars and theologians used to speak of the “inerrancy” of the Bible. But that term proved to be too “loaded” and ambiguous in the long run, and it was dropped in favor of the term “truth” preferred by the Council. Not “truths” in the plural, but “truth” in the singular. Not any kind of truth either, but rather a very specific one. Here is how the Dogmatic Constitution “Dei Verbum” on Divine Revelation defines the truth that can always be found in the Bible as a result of divine inspiration:

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error, that truth that God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.

This latter formula “for the sake of our salvation” is crucial in this definition of biblical truth because, as Ignace de la Potterie observes, in it the Council “gives us finally a clear and firm theological principle on the way we should understand the traditional doctrine on the truth of Scripture.” Incidentally, this great step forward on the issue of biblical truth had been somewhat adumbrated by Vatican I in its Dogmatic Constitution Dei Filius (DzS 3006), which stated: “These books are held by the Church as sacred and canonical not as having been composed by merely human labor and afterwards approved by her

57. In “Dei Verbum” the word “veritas” (truth) is used 13 times, but never in the plural.
authority, not merely because they contain revelation without error (quod revelationem sine errore contineant), but because . . .” Already this formula is quite significant in itself, even before the added clarification of Vatican II. For indeed, here Vatican I, as noted by Oswald Loretz,

refrains absolutely from applying the phrase sine errore to Scripture itself in any respect at all. The Council attaches this sine errore to the revelatio which is contained in Scripture. It is further to be noted that what is achieved is that all error is excluded from the revelatio; in other words, we have only a negative statement before us.60

This negative statement, thanks to the progress realized by Vatican II, has been changed into a positive one: what the Bible contains is not only a revelation without error, but a truthful revelation. And, in order to avoid any ambiguity, this was further clarified in saying that the truthfulness of revelation is essentially that which aims at our salvation. In scholastic terminology, the truth-in-view-of-our-salvation is the formal object of biblical revelation. Worded differently, this means that the biblical text is entirely true without the least mixture of error inasmuch as it communicates the revelation of God and the history of salvation as a help to our own salvation. In short, what one must seek in the Bible are matters concerning salvation; it is only from this angle that the veracity of God and the inerrancy of the inspired writers are engaged.

All this is not a pure invention of theologians. It is solidly based on the witness of Scripture itself. Thus we read in 2 Tm 3:15-17: “. . . from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” About this passage I. Howard Marshall has the following comment:

The purpose of God in the composition of the Scriptures was to guide

people to salvation and the associated way of life. From this statement we may surely conclude that God made the Bible all that it needs to be in order to achieve this purpose. It is in this sense that the word ‘infallible’ is properly applied to the Bible; it means that it is in itself a true and sufficient guide, which may be trusted implicitly . . . that the Bible is essentially trustworthy for the purpose for which God inspired it.  

Let it be noted that the truth envisaged here is much broader in meaning than what we usually mean by a true (as opposed to a false) statement. This kind of truth, so dear to the Greek-Western mentality, is a quality of statements or propositions which convey factual information. Unfortunately, many people reduce the Bible to a collection of “true” statements of this kind: it is supposed to convey information or teaching about God in each one of its sentences. But even a superficial acquaintance with the Bible shows that the Bible is much more than that.

For indeed, what we often see in the Bible is not God speaking to humans but humans speaking to God, or merely turning difficult questions in their minds, or even expressing altogether false opinions (v.g. the friends of Job). Many passages are simply human responses to particular situations, some of these responses being unworthy of our imitation (v.g. the terrible curse at the end of Ps 137). What is revealed to us through the (often unedifying) record of events found in the Bible is how God remained faithful to his people and ceaselessly worked, is working and will work at saving us. This is the particular truth that Scripture teaches us from one end to the other: no amount of ignorance, stubbornness, error, or plain sinfulness can deter God in his plan of salvation. Thus is seen from Genesis to the Apocalypse God’s fidelity (in Hebrew his ‘emeth or truth) to his covenant. Let us also remember that the Hebrew concept of truth emphasizes reliability, solidity, faithfulness. In this respect the Bible never deceives us because, in the words of Oswald Loretz, in it “God manifests his ‘true-ness’ (faithfulness) by standing by his people, and fulfilling his word.”  


This truth “for the sake of our salvation” was revealed, however, not at one particular point of time during a single all-encompassing event. It was revealed only in a gradual way. To this third point we now turn:

3. A progressive truth. Although the Dogmatic Constitution Dei Verbum does not explicitly mention this facet of biblical truth, nevertheless we read in no. 3 that God “prepared the way for the gospel down through the centuries.” And this historical perspective on revelation is extensively developed in the first two chapters of the Constitution. Now this phenomenon of God’s revelation given over a great span of time (the writing of the Bible extended over a period of a thousand years), and the progressive explicitation of its content, have as a consequence that the Bible be seen as a whole, otherwise its message is seriously distorted. As Dei Verbum warns us: “Since holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written, no less serious attention must be given the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light,”

Actually we see this sort of “perspectivist” reading at work in the New Testament itself. There, as reviewed in reference to the full revelation brought about by the Christ-event, many parts of the earlier stages of revelation are either rejected, corrected, or completed. Thus considered obsolete are the necessity of circumcision, the prescriptions and teachings about animal sacrifices, the distinction between clean and unclean food, the institution of the priestly and levitical orders, etc. Yet, no one says of these parts of the Old Testament that they were not the Word of God! It is only that that Word has to be understood in reference to God’s total revelation which ultimately is the very person of the Word of God made flesh.

The same thing can be said concerning the morality of the Old Testament. A lot of it remains valid and is reaffirmed by Jesus and his Church (v.g. the prophets’ insistence on social justice), but some of it is corrected or even openly condemned (see the antitheses of Jesus in Mt 5:21-48). In this connection, as regards the practice of the ban, I. Howard Marshall points out an ines-

capable conclusion: "How can such teachings possibly be reconciled with the New Testament understanding of love and with modern, humane sentiment based on it? There can be no doubt that Christians believe that the central teaching of Jesus and his Church is that they should love their enemies rather than kill them and their families ..." 64

What all this means, of course, is that Old Testament teachings of this sort are certainly not consonant with God’s will, since God is presumably consistent with himself and can hardly command mass murder at one time and condemn it at another time. Again, this comes out through a "holistic" (as opposed to "atomistic") reading of the Bible. Only such a reading can yield biblical truth, because this type of truth is a quality of the entire Bible taken as a unity. In the words of Norbert Lohfink, "Scripture can be said to be without error only if it is read as a unity and if the particular statements it contains are ordered to the whole." 65 In the same train of thought Joseph Coppens writes that "the inspired writings are to be taken as an organic whole whose final meaning at the level of faith, that is as word of God, depends on the last rereadings and on the whole formed by its grouping into a canon." 66 And indeed, as the history of the growth of the biblical text shows, its makers thought of it as a whole and wanted it read as such. 67

If, then, the Bible is seen in its totality, one will easily understand at the same time that the biblical truth that shines through it is the truth that emanates from the totality of its revelation. That truth, and that truth alone, is "for the sake of our salvation." And all the partial truths or even the errors found in the Bible (such as the view that the ban was ordered by God and pleasing to him) must in consequence be seen as mere steps

67. This idea is brilliantly illustrated by Dennis J. McCarthy, S.J., in "Personality, Society, and Inspiration," Theol. Stds. 24 (1963) 553-76. See also similar views in Brown, "And the Lord Said?", 17.
(or perhaps shadows?) in the gradual perception of the larger truth contained in the completed whole. In other words, the meaning of each passage always goes beyond what each individual author intended to say. But each passage becomes a biblical passage not when it is written, but when it is joined to all the other parts of the Bible. This joining relativizes each part and gives it its ultimate "usableness" for the sake of our salvation.

CONCLUSION

This idea of "usableness" or usefulness is finally the key to our problem. For indeed, let us remember what 2 Tm 3:16 told us about the "profitable" character of inspired Scripture, an idea spelled out at Vatican II with its reference to the truth "for the sake of our salvation." Once we have understood that God never wanted that Israel slaughter entire populations, yet that he nevertheless inspired sacred writers to include this horrendous practice in their accounts of the history of Israel, then our own task is to try to "profit" from such passages of the Old Testament and see to it that they are assimilated by us "for the sake of our salvation." A difficult task, indeed, in this extreme case of divine condescension . . . Very tentatively I would venture two modest suggestions in this respect.

a) A "helpful" use of these passages could start with this simple fact: these passages form a stark reminder that the particular human beings God chose for his own people were not very refined or even civilized; actually they could be at times quite callously cruel. And this aspect of the covenantal relationship God-Israel is very comforting for us in our relationship with God. For we, too, are not particularly worthy of his loving election. Yet God disregards our many shadow sides and continues loving us through thick and thin, as he did with unworthy Israel.

b) The positive aspect of the ban is that Israel was ready to go to great lengths to avoid idolatry and possible sources of pagan influences. Perhaps we, too, without of course resorting to the same extreme methods, could find inspiration in this sort of wholehearted refusal to compromise our values and convic-
tions in the face of today's secular/pagan world.

Probably more imaginative Christians will be able to suggest other and better ways of using the ban-passages of Scripture. However, it might well happen that, whatever our efforts at "taming" these passages, we will still continue to be scandalized by their sheer brutality. If that be the case, then these passages can still play a positive role in our lives, nevertheless, if only they compel us to take sides in this particular issue as would a "shock treatment." In other words, if these passages make us recoil with horror at the thought of slaying our enemies, then let us go all the way and follow the opposite stand proposed by Jesus: let us love them.