

Comptes rendus

MICHAEL BERGMANN, MICHAEL J. MURRAY, MICHAEL C. REA éds., *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013 (HB 2011), xii + 337 pages.



“Is he the God of the Old or the New Testament this morning?”

Dana Fradon, *Is he the God of the Old or the New Testament this morning?*, New Yorker Cartoon, publié le 5 décembre 1994.

« God certainly does not exist, and anyway it’s all His fault ». This aphorism sums up the contradictions at the heart of this fascinating but unfocussed book. The words are borrowed from the late and much regretted Tony Judt and appear in an epigraph to the concluding essay by Howard Wettstein, entitled « God’s Struggles ». Judt was not by then a practising Jew (and had not been for a long time), but Wettstein is. That an atheist should be cited by a believer is apt for a book which consists of scholarly debates about the eccentric and irascible sadist (for one contributor at least) who is the God of the Bible. The participants come from various backgrounds, so that atheists are pitted, as in the original conference at the University of Notre Dame, against theologians, biblical experts against professors of philosophy. The book is not entirely free of jargon (« the reflexive collation of the ontological and the economic », p. 299) but for the most part it provides a feast of intelligent and challenging readings of the Hebrew, and to some extent the Christian, Bible.

«How might one even begin to come to terms with divinely mandated horror?» is the way that Wettstein's essay, one of the best in the collection, formulates the issue. Unlike some of the participants, he is neither inclined to minimize the problem nor to explain it away. Some take the view that since God has granted the gift of life he can justifiably withdraw it at will (p. 233), and after all, being with God in Heaven is likely to be better than life on earth. Hence the killing of babies, when divinely mandated, may be not only ok, but required. Others (Eleanor Stump in particular, but also Richard Swinburne) write about the need for Israel to learn gradually how to behave in light of its peculiar dispensation (being Chosen), and this takes rather a long time. The Canaanites are destroyed, or moved out, not so much because of their own behaviour as because of the way Israel refuses to learn its lessons. For some, questions of genre (allegory, stylized quasi-history for example) supervene and require a reading that does not go looking for historical fact: God does not require the destruction of the Amorites or Canaanites and the rest but rather wants readers of the narrative to destroy sin in their own lives. Other contributors argue that the Conquest, especially the elaborate story told in the Book of Joshua, should be read in the context of the Babylonian exile: it is thus projecting an «ideal» representation of Israel's history and should not be taken literally.

Surprisingly few of the contributors (Gary A. Anderson, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Christopher Seitz) take into account the question of the historicity of the Conquest itself, but then that is largely because the point of the volume lies in debating what the Bible says about God, and so it will not make much difference whether the commands to destroy the Amalekites, women and infants too, in 1 Samuel 15,1-23, or the bashing of babies in Psalm 137, is an accurate reflection of what the ancient Israelites actually did. The Christians among the contributors wriggle even more uncomfortably than their Jewish counterparts in their efforts to defend a perfect and omnipotent God. He after all is the one who, according to the New Testament, prepares eternal damnation for many of us, in whose new improved world the Law is even more stringent because inward and about desires as much as acts, who mandates the gory scenes of the final judgement, and who requires his own son to suffer a long and painful death. More than one of the Christian participants has honest trouble, for example, with Augustine's assumption that the rock on which the enemy babies are bashed is actually the Rock, Jesus Christ.

The intensity of the discussions and the powerful emotions evoked by several of the topics make the volume at times hard to put down. The author of the first essay, Louise Anthony, sets the tone for the non-believers. She is outraged that Moses is denied entry to the promised land because he has the temerity to strike a rock when God had told him simply to speak to it (p. 39). In a witty essay, she shows that what really matters to God is not adultery and murder but whether the deed is authorized. Nathan the prophet tells David, who has committed both sins, that because he admitted his guilt God has «put away his sin» and vacated the death sentence. «Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die», as the text of 2 Samuel 12,14 says. Anthony adds: «Adultery and murder are one thing: dissing the Lord is *serious*».

In spite of the high level of philosophical sophistication shown by several of the essayists, the book as a whole suffers from the lack of any clear definition of its goals or its general purpose. The organizers of the original conference, deliberately it seems, never called for a definition of the key word «evil», and so the editors of the volume also never ask themselves whether they need to try for

one. Thus no-one broaches the key issue of whether the word should be read primarily as a noun or an adjective. In the title it is apparently a noun qualified by the adjective «divine», yet the book never quite allows itself to reverse the words and invert the concept: is God evil? That is understandable for a book written within the traditional or orthodox Judeo-Christian framework, though some attention might have been given to Gnosticism or other heretical tendencies. Marcion is mentioned more than once, not only as a stimulus to the formation of the Christian canon, but also for his key notion that the god of the Old Testament is not the same as the god of the New. But his views get little discussion. This allows the participants to avoid any unpleasant mudslinging between Jews and Christians, and the conference was convened, after all, at a leading Roman Catholic university. Only once does anyone quote Isaiah 45,7, and it is, once again, Howard Wettstein: «I am Y-H-W-H and there is none else: / I form light and create darkness, / Peace is my doing, and I create evil, / I Y-H-W-H do all these things». He explains that he prefers to cite the Tetragrammaton in this way because the form «the Lord» obscures the fact that it is a proper name, and thus introduces what he regards as inappropriate distance and formality. Indeed his argument goes on to describe a god who is far from perfect, who is angry and resentful, who changes his mind, who is subject to flattery, who struggles.

With this kind of god, the one portrayed in the *Song of Songs* for example (and Wettstein stresses the erotic component), it is possible to have a personal relationship, «someone with whom we share our deepest longings, pains, and joys. There is also the suggestion of a certain longing on the part of God, for intimacy with His people, for sharing their love in the context of a transformed world»¹. Wettstein does not mention Kierkegaard but he is surprisingly one of only two contributors to spend time, as Kierkegaard did so movingly in *Fear and Trembling*, discussing the parallels between the Book of Job and the *Akedah* (God's command to Abraham to kill Isaac). Louise Anthony is the other, and she adds Adam and Eve to the paradigm. Her essay poses the question «Does God Love us?» and answers with a loud «no»: God is «a terrible parent». Wettstein's rather more sympathetic reading (he is a believer after all) argues that both Abraham and Job are «moral heroes» precisely because they challenge what they regard as God's injustice, and yet both are, eventually, induced to go along with him, to follow the path he lays out. In the end, Wettstein's essay reproduces what is called several times elsewhere in the volume «sceptical theism». A student of his had said that one needs an understanding of doctrine in order to know to whom one prays. Not so, replied Wettstein. «One prays; one achieves (sometimes) a sense of intimate contact. But exactly who or what "stands on the other end" is another question, a matter well beyond us»². A Christian would, I suppose, have had another response.

The volume is introduced by the invocation of a quite different God, one who is «morally perfect and unconditionally deserving of devotion, obedience, love, and worship». Therein lies the problem. For this same God condones and even commands such «moral atrocities» as slavery, rape, genocide, and child sacrifice. If these «texts constitute divine revelation», as the authors rather awkwardly put it, how can that God be worshipped? The time is ripe for a reappraisal both because of terrorist attacks performed in the name of God – which seems to mean Islamist attacks, since Samson is never

¹ HOWARD WETTSTEIN, *The Significance of Religious Experience*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 168.

² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

mentioned – and because the so-called «New Atheists» like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens have made much of the way «the sacred texts of the great theistic religions» glory in such violence (p.3). A few participants add that global politics should also be considered in this light – or darkness. In an essay simply entitled «What About the Canaanites?» Gary A. Anderson discusses the way the Bible has authorized the activities of the Puritans in New England, the Boers in South Africa, European settlers in Australia, as well as right-wing Zionists in Israel and their Christian allies in the USA. But he continues that, since God promised the land to Abraham and his descendants, they have a providential or «supernatural right» to it. And anyway, its present inhabitants were wicked. So... er... that's all right then.

The helpful introduction contains a useful list of the various options and strategies for dealing with the problematic texts of the Bible. One can a) deny that the texts are divinely inspired, an option taken by three of the contributors, all atheists (Louise Anthony, Edwin Curley for whom God may be «a sadistic bastard», Evan Fales), and in some degree one believer (Wes Morrison); one can b) allow for the texts as inspired but deny that they say what they say (early Christian fathers like Origen, Jerome, even Augustine took that line quite often, preferring spiritual allegory to literal history; in this volume for example, «It does not follow from God's giving the command "Exterminate the Jerichoites" that God's end was that there be no Jerichoites», p.175); or one can c) allow the texts to be inspired and insist that they serve a greater good, one of which might be the punishment of sin. A slightly more savoury version of this strategy is often called the «unknown goods» defence. We lack the cognitive capacity, or perhaps simply the information, necessary to see how the destruction of Canaanite children might be a good thing. We cannot, furthermore, know that God was wrong to command the destruction of Jericho, since God and human beings do not share what Mark Murphy calls «a dikaiological order» (i.e. a common sense of justice). God in fact can do no wrong. By definition.

Since this is a book constructed by philosophers of religion, it is perhaps to be expected that there are few considerations of the kind that have been common in the scholarly worlds that generated those magnificent compilations usually known as ANET (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edition, Princeton University Press, 1969). Indeed the editors admit that ancient near eastern culture in general, especially literary styles, are areas that need what they call «further research». Even more striking is the absence of any real discussion of what constitutes the authority of scripture or religious tradition. True, the formation of the Jewish and Christian canons is too complex an issue to be succinctly treated, although one essay, by Christopher Seitz, does make use of the interpretive «canonical tradition» associated with Brevard Childs in order to explain, or excuse, the story of the Conquest. Throughout the volume, however, if the idea that only part of a divinely inspired text should be authoritative for either belief or practice is raised, it is immediately rejected, virtually without discussion (e.g. p.181). And exactly how a text gets to be regarded as divinely inspired in the first place is not considered, even though one fine chapter (by Evan Fales) is called «Satanic Verses» (without mentioning Rushdie or the whole issue of Satanic interference with inspiration on which Rushdie's book turns). Rarely is it even allowed that the Bible is more like a library, consisting of books that conflict with each other. In Richard Swinburne's essay on the history of interpretation, this idea, that the Bible is a patchwork of passages from different centuries

and cultures, and has thus been variously and not always literally interpreted, somehow and rather desperately requires that the whole Bible be regarded as inspired (p. 213). Thus Paul at 1 Corinthians 9,9-10 could deny that « You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain » (Deuteronomy 25,4) should be read literally. In fact it means – and a long tradition of priests and prophets speaks here – that congregations should provide adequate remuneration of church leaders. Or the baby-bashing verse at Psalm 137,9 can be read as a blessing on those who destroy their evil inclinations through the power of Christ. Elsewhere the concept of a divinely inspired bible is ridiculed by a splendidly articulate sceptic like Edwin Curley, whose debate with Peter van Inwagen is the only place the problem of inspiration or divine revelation is seriously broached.

The title for the original conference, though not retained for the book, contained a tag from Isaiah 55,8: « My ways are not your ways ». That motto was taken to mean what one sceptic calls the « *Higher Ways Objection* » although in its original context, as Edwin Curley points out (p. 68) the statement simply means that God is more forgiving than men usually are. The change of tone in the new title certainly makes for a more eye-catching concept. The addition of the question mark aptly sums up the entire issue.

NEIL FORSYTH

YANN BERTHELET, *Gouverner avec les dieux. Autorité, auspices et pouvoir sous la République romaine et sous Auguste*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres (Mondes anciens 1), 2015, 448 pages.

L'ouvrage issu de la thèse soutenue par Yann Berthelet à l'Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne en 2012, sous la direction de Jean-Michel David et John Scheid, mérite qu'on s'y arrête. L'ensemble de la recherche doctorale s'est d'ailleurs vu décerner le Prix de l'Institut de Droit Romain de Paris ainsi que le Prix Aguirre-Basualdo en Lettres et Sciences Humaines de la Chancellerie des universités de Paris.

Cette mise au point séminale sur les institutions romaines s'attache à expliciter les rouages de concepts centraux dans le fonctionnement politique de la République romaine, tels l'*auçtoritas* et la *potestas* dans leurs rapports de complémentarité et d'exclusion réciproque, ou encore l'*auspicium* et l'*imperium*, ainsi que leur évolution aux débuts du Principat.

Après quelques très brèves précisions générales sur la divination publique romaine, le propos se concentre sur certains concepts dont la maîtrise est essentielle à la compréhension de la matière constituant l'objet de l'étude, la divination augurale, opposée à la divination qualifiée de sacrée et permettant aux partenaires humains (prêtres, magistrats, Sénat et peuple dans son ensemble) de la procédure de s'assurer de l'agrément des dieux – donc de réaffirmer leur propre légitimité – par une observation codifiée des signes.

Cette recherche touche donc « non seulement à l'histoire religieuse, mais également à l'histoire idéologique, politique et sociale » (p. 17). L'auteur insiste sur le fait que « l'approche philologique et institutionnelle de la divination augurale doit être éclairée par les apports de la sociologie et de l'anthropologie politique » (p. 26). Il mobilise cette dernière lorsque les *gentes* sont définies comme clans hiérarchisés (p. 55), groupes d'individus se revendiquant d'un même ancêtre commun (p. 72).