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April, 2019

Drawing Lines: The Moral Problem of Reproducing Immoral Biblical Texts

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Drawing Lines

A Suggestion for Addressing the Moral Problem of Reproducing Immoral Biblical Texts in Commentaries and Bibles

The book of Leviticus contains many norms and instructions that have fallen into abeyance in later Jewish and Christian congregations and cultures. Normative forms of Judaism and Christianity do not follow the plain meaning of these verses. Such verses therefore pose an interesting problem for interpreting their continuing theological and cultural significance.¹

A subset of this material, however, also poses a moral problem for commentators and bible publishers. Some verses of Leviticus express norms that explicitly conflict with the legal and ethical teachings of contemporary Jewish and Christian denominations, and also with the laws of modern nations. Among them are texts mandating that readers treat some other people in ways now widely regarded as immoral, cruel, inhumane, and exploitive—texts that call for and/or have historically justified genocide, indiscriminate capital punishment, slavery, and the subjugation of women by men. National and international law today declares most of these behaviors illegal and subject to criminal prosecution.

The moral problem for commentators and publishers is that, by publishing bibles and commentaries that reproduce these texts, we continue to promulgate claims of divine approval for immoral and illegal behavior. I call this a “moral” problem rather than an “ethical” quandary because the issue does not require difficult ethical reasoning. The moral imperative to not perpetrate or condone genocide, indiscriminate capital punishment, slavery, and patriarchy are quite clear to most or, in the case of patriarchy, at least many Jews and Christians. For these people, therefore, this is not a problem of ethical reasoning but of moral will, because reproducing these particular texts prioritizes the religious ideal of preserving scripture unaltered over these moral imperatives.

¹ See my other essay in this volume, “Unperformed Rituals in an Unread Book,” pp.25–33.

1 The Problem of Latent Normative Texts

The negative social impact of immoral biblical norms has often been restrained by long-standing traditions of *halakhah*, preaching, canon law, and commentary. For example, whereas Pentateuchal texts mandate the death penalty for a wide variety of offenses ranging from murder (Gen 9:6) and blasphemy (Lev 24:14, 16–17) to hitting or cursing one's parents (21:15, 17), rabbinic *halakhah* intensified the biblical requirement of two witnesses for conviction (Num 35:30; Deut 20:15) to the point of making it virtually impossible to carry out capital punishment.² Modern national legislation has, over time, steadily reduced the number of offenses that may be punished by the death penalty to only first-degree murder and, sometimes, treason. In many countries, capital punishment has been abolished entirely.³

Commentators often use historical context to argue that biblical texts raised moral standards at the time they were written, even if they seem immoral today. So 19th-century abolitionists argued that slavery contradicts the moral teachings of the Bible, despite verses that seem to validate the practice. Interpreters today continue to argue that the Bible's moral trajectory supports liberty and justice.⁴

However, the iconic status of the biblical text has often overridden these interpretive traditions. The example of slavery is instructive for the tension between violent biblical norms and restraining commentary traditions. Despite the prominence of Christian leaders in the abolitionist movement, Christian slaveholders could cite solid biblical precedents for defending their right to own slaves.⁵ The

2 b. Sanh. 37B, 161; b. Ketub. 30A, 30B; B. A. Berkowitz, *Execution and Invention: Death Penalty Discourse in Early Rabbinic and Christian Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); C. T. Halberstam, *Law and Truth in Biblical and Rabbinic Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 85–91.

3 W. Schabas, *The Abolition of the Death Penalty in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); J. J. Megivern, *The Death Penalty: An Historical and Theological Survey* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).

4 For a recent example of this deep and widespread commentary traditions, see R. H. Gnuse, *Trajectories of Justice: What the Bible Says about Slaves, Women and Homosexuality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015). I have myself argued that Second-Temple-period priests used the Torah to promote more inclusive and accommodationist policies regarding intermarriage and foreigners than did other Jewish literature that has survived from this period: see J. W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus: From Sacrifice to Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 142–172, or idem, “The Torah as the Rhetoric of Priesthood,” in G. Knoppers/B. M. Levinson (ed.), *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding Its Promulgation and Acceptance* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 319–32.

5 P. J. Wogaman, *Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 29–30; 180–6. On the influence of biblical slave texts, see J. A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

issue was settled in 19th-century America not by scriptural interpretation or by moral reasoning, but by a bloody and brutal civil war.⁶ The racist legacy of the African slave trade continues today to haunt cultures on at least four continents.

The Bible's latent potential for preserving abhorrent norms is exacerbated by Jewish and Christian religious movements that have, at one time or another, embraced the rhetoric of "back to the Bible." Though the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation is most famous for this rhetoric, it began much earlier with the Karaites, who already in the eighth-to-ninth centuries rejected rabbinic traditions codified by the Talmuds and focused sustained attention on Torah and Tanak. In twelfth-century France and Italy, the Waldensians challenged Catholic authorities with a popular appeal to the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, as did the fourteenth-century Lollards in England. More recently, in colonial and post-colonial Africa and Asia, new ethnic churches have turned the Bible against the colonizing Europeans by revitalizing biblical practices, often from Pentateuchal law, to establish themselves as more authentically biblical than the colonizers.⁷ In Europe and Palestine, the Zionists found the Tanak more useful than the Talmud for establishing a modern Jewish state in the territory of ancient Israel.⁸

University Press, 2009); S. R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

6 Historians debate the degree to which Christian ethics ultimately influenced the outcome of these debates. While many credit the tradition for influencing the culture's morals for the better (e.g. R. Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004]), others think the bad effects outweigh the good (e.g. H. Avalos, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship* [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013]). Of course, sweeping evaluations of the Bible's influence, much less of entire religious traditions, are too general to offer much historical insight. The influence of particular biblical verses is easier to trace and evaluate through the history of their citation and use.

7 J. W. Watts, *Leviticus 1–10* (HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 84; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 175–89; P. Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 50–2, 55, 65–6; N. J. Savishinsky, "African Dimensions of the Jamaican Rastafarian Movement," in N. S. Murrell et al. (ed.), *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998) 125–44, on p. 139; D. C. van Zyl, "In Africa, Theology is Not Thought Out but Danced Out: On the Theological Significance of Old Testament Symbolism and Rituals in African Zionist Churches," *OTE* 8 (1995) 425–38, on pp. 429–34; S. W. D. Dube, "Hierophanies: A Hermeneutic Paradigm for Understanding Zionist Ritual," in G. C. Oosthuizen et al. (ed.), *Afro-Christianity at the Grassroots: Its Dynamics and Strategies* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 105–18, on p. 114; A. F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 131.

8 Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 81–2; Z. J. Braiterman, "The Emergence of Modern Religion: Moses Mendelssohn, Neoclassicism, and Ceremonial Aesthetics," in C. Wiese/M. Urban (ed.), *German-Jewish Thought Between Religion and Politics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012) 11–29; A. Saposnik, "The Desert Comes to Zion: A Narrative Ends its Wandering," in P. Barmash/W. D. Nelson (ed.), *Exodus in the Jewish Experience: Echoes and Reverberations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2015), 213–46.

The religious and moral power of such movements to bring about reform and even revolution is undeniable. But the biblical text that they revive also contains material that can justify abhorrent social practices. In turning people's attention to the original scriptures of Christian and Jewish traditions, bible-based reforms risk also empowering immoral texts. Recent examples include legislation introduced in the Ugandan parliament in 2009 mandating the death penalty for homosexual acts⁹ and a movement among some ultra-Orthodox rabbis in Israel to revive the biblical mandates for holy war to defend Jewish occupation of Palestinian land.¹⁰ In the United States, political conflicts over the death penalty involve religious arguments invoking biblical texts on both sides of the issue.¹¹

2 The Moral Impact of Bible Publishing

Historians record the prominent role of biblical interpretation in these ethical debates, but have paid little attention to the influence of bible publishing. For more than 500 years, technological advances in printing along with rising literacy rates have steadily expanded access to all parts of the biblical text, and are doing so again through the current digital revolution.¹² Previously, when most people heard biblical texts read aloud rather than reading them for themselves, lectionaries mediated biblical texts through interpretive lenses. Glosed bibles, rabbinic bibles and, now, "study" bibles still encase the biblical texts with interpretation on every page, but they also privilege the biblical text by their typography and layout. The visual format distinguishes scripture from commentary, and invites the

9 A bill calling for capital punishment for "aggressive" homosexual acts was introduced in the Ugandan parliament in 2009. The penalty had been reduced to life imprisonment when it passed into law in 2014, but the legislation was invalidated by Ugandan courts on procedural grounds later the same year. Anti-gay legislation in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa is widely supported by local Christian leaders and by Evangelical organizations from America. See J. Gettleman, "Americans' Role Seen in Uganda Anti-Gay Push," *New York Times*, January 3, 2010 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/04/world/africa/04uganda.html>; accessed April 17, 2018). On the broader historical and cultural context, see the essays in A. van Klinken/E. Chitando (ed.), *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa* (London: Routledge, 2016); and J. Sadgrove/R. M. Vanderbeck/J. Andersson/G. Valentine/K. Ward, "Morality Plays and Money Matters: Towards a Situated Understanding of the Politics of Homosexuality in Uganda," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 50/1 (2012) 103–29.

10 R. Firestone, *Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); idem, "Holy War: Rabbinic to Modern Judaism," *EBR* 12 (2015); and more generally, R. Eisen, *The Peace and Violence of Judaism: From the Bible to Modern Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

11 A. Santoro, "Religion and Capital Punishment in the United States," *Religion Compass* 8/5 (2014), 159–74 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12105>).

12 J. S. Siker, *Liquid Scripture: The Bible in the Digital World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

reader's eye to dwell on the ancient text more than on its modern interpretation. Many printed and digital bibles contain no explanatory commentary at all.

Recent studies of the iconic dimension of sacred texts have demonstrated the powerful influence that ritualizing the material form and visual appearance of books has over readers, congregations, religious movements, and even nations.¹³ The stereotypical bindings and distinctive page formats of many bibles legitimize the religious identity and status of their readers and handlers.¹⁴ Congregational rituals, visual art and mystical traditions combine to identify the book of scripture with God or Christ. For Jews and many Christians, the Torah scroll or the codex Bible is the most sacred or, even, the only sacred object in their religious experience.¹⁵

The history of Jewish and Christian controversies over war, slavery, anti-Semitism and patriarchy shows that biblical texts retain their power to justify actions and institutions despite considerable moral teaching and commentary to the contrary. History therefore demonstrates that it is not enough for commentaries simply to argue that particular verses of scripture have been superseded by changing cultural contexts or that, in their original contexts, these verses advocated improvements over existing norms. The iconic status of their continuing appearance in the sacred text preserves their latent power to be invoked malevolently again and again.

So I question the morality of my profession which insists on reproducing these verses as written. If I found an ancient manuscript that omitted them or if I advanced a compositional theory that identified them as secondary additions, the established practices of biblical studies would allow me to alter them or delete them from my commentary's translation. If sufficient numbers of other biblical scholars agreed with my judgment, the change might be reflected in new Bible translations for the mass market.¹⁶ But the discipline of modern biblical studies provides no similar precedents for dealing with immoral verses that have been used to justify pervasive and malevolent violence.

The practice of encouraging scholars to emend the biblical text for historical but not for moral reasons is 200-hundred-years old, as Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood have shown.¹⁷ Enlightenment thought of the seventeenth

13 See the essays collected in J.W. Watts (ed.), *Iconic Books and Texts* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013).

14 J.W. Watts, "The Three Dimensions of Scriptures," in *Iconic Books and Texts*, 8–30.

15 See the essays collected in J.W. Watts/Y. Yoo (ed.), *Books As Sacred Beings* (Sheffield: Equinox, forthcoming).

16 E.g., how most bibles today reflect the text-critical indeterminacy of the end of Mark's Gospel.

17 S.D. Moore/Y. Sherwood, "Biblical Studies 'after' Theory: Onwards Towards the Past," *Biblical Interpretation* 18 (2010) 1–27, 87–113, 191–225, reprinted and expanded in Moore/Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

and eighteenth centuries included serious moral criticism of Biblical teachings. Leading philosophers thought about how to modify or adapt the text to meet the standards of rational thought.¹⁸ Subsequent biblical scholarship, however, sidelined the ethical problems posed by biblical texts by instead focusing on historical research into the origins and development of biblical literature and ideas.¹⁹

This poses a moral problem for the discipline because it implicates the field of biblical studies in the evil perpetuated by people citing these texts. It is not just the Bible itself that is implicated in justifying genocide by providing the model of conquering Canaan to justify settler colonialism, as well as divine support for slavery, religious inquisitions of heretics, witch-hunts, pogroms, and misogyny of all sorts. Present-day biblical scholars are also implicated for failing to take corrective measures and instead preserving and publishing immoral norms.

We are, of course, already implicated by the violent heritage of our history and society, in different ways depending on our own identities and social locations. For example, a 1790 census lists my ancestor, James Watts, who farmed former Cherokee land²⁰ in Laurens County, South Carolina, as the owner of seven slaves. His brothers, George and John, owned ten more. Neither the census nor family records provide any more information about these slaves or how my ancestors justified owning them.²¹ In that time and location, the slaves were presumably Africans or descendants of Africans forcibly brought to America. Given the times and my family name suggesting descent from English Protestants, these slave owners probably believed that the Bible justified their actions. More than two centuries later, I now find myself facing the task of reproducing in my Leviticus commentary some of the texts that excused my ancestors for violently enslaving these people. For me, then, as a white, male, U. S. citizen whose family has resided in North America for more than 300 years, the problem of immoral latent norms in the Bible not only implicates my ancestors for violent actions which they most likely justified by biblical texts, it also implicates me for promoting the career of

18 One product of such thinking took the form of two editions of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* published by Thomas Jefferson in 1804 and 1820. See H. Rubenstein/B. Clark Smith/J. Stagnitto Ellis, *The Jefferson Bible, Smithsonian Edition: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth by Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2011).

19 Moore/Sherwood, "Biblical Studies 'After' Theory," 91–107.

20 Ceded in 1755 by the Cherokee in a treaty with the English governor of South Carolina. On treaties between colonial powers and Native American nations, see R.N. Clinton, "Treaties with Native Nations: Iconic Historical Relics or Modern Necessity?" in S. Shown Harjo (ed.), *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2014) 14–33.

21 The 1790 South Carolina census recorded the names of only the male heads of household. It counted other male and female adults in the household, as well as the number of children and slaves. My family's records have preserved the names of these men's wives and children, but make no mention of slaves at all.

these texts through my teaching and research about them, not least by writing a commentary and new translation of Leviticus.

Moore and Sherwood pointed out that feminist, ideological and post-colonial critiques are restoring ethical criticism to the repertoire of biblical scholars.²² I add that commentary's long history of failing to restrain immoral uses of biblical texts shows the need to extend ethical critique to how the biblical text itself gets reproduced. Biblical commentators and translators usually focus our attention on the semantic dimension of the text and leave its visual features—the type-face, page layout, and binding—to printers and publishers. That practice conforms to the strong and ancient belief of scholars that what counts, what is most important, is interpreting the semantic text. Scholars usually regard iconic ritualization of the text's appearance and material form as, at best, a concession to the ignorance of lay people or, at worst, an encouragement to idolatry.²³ By taking this position, we have ceded to publishers and book sellers the power to legitimize religious identities and ideas through the iconic dimension of scriptures. The problem of immoral norms in biblical texts needs to be corrected iconically by altering their appearance to make clear in the text itself that Jewish and Christian traditions have repudiated them, as well as by notes and comments explaining the reasons for doing so and the history that makes it necessary.

3 How to Strike Through Immoral Biblical Norms

Modern software for editing documents provides a ready means for marking legible text as no longer applicable: the strikethrough (or cross-out). The practice of striking through mistakes to add corrections above the line or in the margins dates back to manuscript cultures. For example, even the rigid guidelines for copying Torah scrolls in the Talmud allow up to three corrections per page.²⁴ Though parchment can usually be corrected by scraping away the ink, ancient biblical manuscripts sometimes also contain strikethrough corrections.²⁵ Now digital texts use strikethrough to track changes in evolving documents. It is so easy that striking through one's own or other's comments is a popular (and frequently

²² Moore/Sherwood, "Biblical Studies 'After' Theory," 107.

²³ D. Miller Parmenter, "Material Scripture," in T. Beal (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, from *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t454/e97> [accessed June 4, 2018]); J. W. Watts, "Ancient Iconic Texts and Scholarly Expertise," in Watts, *Iconic Books and Texts*, 374–84.

²⁴ b. Menah. 29b.

²⁵ E.g. the Qumran Isaiah scroll (*IQIsa^a*) at Isa 21:1; Latin Codex Laudianus (E) at Acts 8:37. For pictures of more elaborate strikethroughs in medieval manuscripts of all sorts, see B. C. Keene, "Medieval Copyediting," *The Iris: Behind the Scenes at the Getty*, April 8, 2014 (<http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/medieval-copyediting/>; accessed April 18, 2018).

ridiculed) practice on blogs and social media.²⁶ However, strikethrough was also used philosophically by Martin Heidegger and became prominent in the writings of Jacques Derrida. He struck through words to place them *sous rature* “under erasure” to mark their meaning as problematically undecidable despite the fact that he must use them. Gayatri Spivak observed about Derrida’s practice: “Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.”²⁷

I propose that commentators and other bible translators should use strike-through to mark normative statements in biblical verses that contemporary Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions have strongly repudiated as contradicting the moral teachings of scripture and of the traditions themselves. The judgment indicated by striking through biblical verses would not be text-critical and historical as in traditional biblical scholarship, nor epistemological as in philosophy, but rather moral. I propose that strikethroughs should mark biblical texts that fail even the lowest standards of moral decency, specifically texts that advocate or excuse human acts of genocide (including violent anti-Semitism), indiscriminate capital punishment, slavery, and patriarchy. For example, Leviticus 20:26–27 should be printed like this:

26 You are holy to me because I, יהוה, am holy. I have separated you from the nations to be mine. 27 ~~Any man or woman who is possessed by a ghost or spirit must certainly be killed. They must stone them with rocks. Their blood is on themselves.~~

The strikethrough will mark this text’s mandates as immoral. I do not suggest deleting such texts, because doing so would erase the literary context and the historical record. Instead, the strikethrough indelibly marks this verse as superseded by basic moral standards expressed in other verses in Leviticus, most famously in 19:18, 34, and elsewhere in the Bible and its interpretive traditions.

My suggestion to strike through immoral normative texts is not just a salve to my own conscience for reproducing them. A technical commentary offers a new translation as a model for mass-market publishers to follow. In the same way, my commentary will strike through these verses to suggest to publishers of mass-market translations of the Bible that they should do the same thing. Strikethrough has an advantage over other typographical means of marking a text (e.g. italics, different fonts, rubrication) because its meaning is intuitively obvious: the text is abrogated while remaining legible. Of course, no textual feature is

26 On the popularity of strike-through in digital media, see N. Cohen, “Crossing Out, for Emphasis,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2007 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/23/business/media/23link.html>; accessed April 8, 2018); M. Ticak, “Strikethrough and Why It’s so Popular,” *Grammarly Blog* (<https://www.grammarly.com/blog/strikethrough-formatting-popularity/>; accessed January 2, 2017).

27 G. Spivak, “Translator’s Preface,” in J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), xiv. See the discussion of using strikethrough for composition in C. Barker/E. A. Jane, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), 98–9.

immune to misunderstanding, so notes and introductions are still needed to explain the moral judgment conveyed by strikethrough. But the implications of strikethrough are more obvious than most other typographical marks. Another advantage is that bible owners can strike through immoral verses themselves, without waiting for publishers or denominations to do it for them. Everyone is empowered to strikethrough immoral texts in their own bibles, just like other ways of ritualizing the iconic dimension of scriptures.²⁸

4 Criteria for Striking Through Verses

The problem, of course, is deciding what to strike through—literally, where to draw the line. I suggest striking through only laws, instructions, curses and proverbs, but not stories, and only those norms with a known history of malevolent applications and consequences. Normative texts that fall most obviously into this category endorse slavery, indiscriminate capital punishment, genocide including violent anti-Semitism, and patriarchy.

Even though modern countries disagree about whether capital punishment is ever an appropriate punishment, with some still executing murderers and traitors, all agree in principle that it should be restricted to the most heinous and violent crimes and that it can only be lawfully applied by the courts after a fair trial. Leviticus does not reflect such restrictions. I therefore strike all biblical endorsements of capital punishment, because they make adultery, idolatry, blasphemy and sexual offenses equivalent to murder by treating all of them as capital offenses. That rhetoric has created many victims over time and does not stand the moral test of the recommended practices of either Christianity or Judaism. So I suggest striking through all verses calling for capital punishment. I do not strike through verses that threaten divine punishment, such as the threat to כרת “cut off” offenders (e.g. Lev 17:9–10), because these threats do not explicitly authorize human violence (even though they have often been read that way). Biblical literature and its commentary traditions often emphasize God’s monopoly over such retribution.²⁹ Biblically-based traditions have regularly made creative use of divine threats of retribution to understand their own history and teach responsibility. The rhetoric of divine punishment shapes the histories of Israel (Judges-Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah) as well as the prophetic and apocalyptic books and related narratives (such as the Gospels), and has

²⁸ Watts, *Three Dimensions*, 22–3, 27–8; idem, *Understanding the Pentateuch as a Scripture* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 70, 74–7, 86–7.

²⁹ E.g. Deut 32:35 was interpreted as limiting human vengeance in Rom 12:17–19, 2 Enoch 50:4–5, the *Testament of Gad* 6:7, and *Sifre* 325. Cf. also warnings against judging other people (e.g. Rom 2:1–8).

generated sustained theological reflections in the books of Job and Romans. On the other hand, the rhetoric of God's judgment on the Canaanites' immorality which justifies the Israelites' conquest of their land (Lev 18:24–25, 27; 20:23) has often served subsequently as a justification for crusades and colonial conquests around the world, and therefore deserves to be struck through.³⁰

It will be clear to most readers that verses that justify enslaving others and committing acts of genocide and indiscriminate capital punishment do not reflect the Bible's moral ideals according to the consensus of Jewish and Christian ethical thought, even though people in various times have continued to cite them to justify their violent actions. However, verses that justify patriarchy, misogyny, and second-class status for women have not yet achieved such a broad consensus. Jewish and Christian denominations continue to be divided about these issues. Some still use these verses to justify limiting clerical roles (as priests, ministers, rabbis, and scribes) to men and to defend patriarchy within families. Others have opened all of their leadership roles to women and actively denounce patriarchy in families and societies as a severe moral failure. My proposal calls upon congregations and denominations that champion women's rights, such as my own United Church of Christ, to use bibles consistent with their own moral stance.

You may think that striking through immoral norms will introduce divisiveness into bible publishing. The Bible is often lauded for unifying various denominations and even providing common ground between Jews and Christians. The cultural reality, however, is quite different. The material forms of biblical books as scrolls or codices have historically differentiated the two religions. Christian liturgical use of translated bibles has also distinguished churches from each other and fueled schisms along ethnic and doctrinal lines.³¹ Today, publishers produce bibles customized for denominations as well as for different age-groups, genders, and many other social distinctions.³² The ideal of the Bible's unifying function does not accord with the cultural reality of diverse bible translations and publications. Therefore, the proposal to strike through biblical verses that endorse patriarchy and other forms of discrimination against women cannot be criticized for introducing divisiveness into bible publishing. Doctrinal, ethnic, and denominational divisions have long since been entrenched there by translations and bible editions.

30 For example, the European conquest of the Western hemisphere frequently invoked the biblical rhetoric of a "promised land" inhabited by pagan "Canaanites" or, even, as an uninhabited land. See C. Cherry, *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971); R. Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology," *Christianity and Crisis* 29 (1989) 261–5.

31 Watts, *Understanding the Pentateuch*, 92–105, 138–41.

32 T. Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 41–84, 129–45.

You may wonder why I do not strike more normative passages that have fallen into abeyance in many religious communities, such as the rules for offerings in Leviticus 1–7 and the purity regulations of Leviticus 11–16. I do not strike through them because the history of the interpretation and use of these texts is not as negative as the cases described above. Though Jews and Christians since 70 CE have not practiced animal offerings (much), they have made productive theological and devotional use of the offering instructions. The purity rules have prompted extensive debates about ethics, especially around issues of social difference and inclusion. Minority religious and ethnic communities have often used purity instructions to distinguish and legitimize themselves against oppressors and colonizers.³³

My criteria for striking through some verses as immoral—namely, explicitly mandating human violence and/or a history of oppressive use—enable clear decisions in some cases, but they inevitably lead to drawing ever finer distinctions in others. The complications of this kind of moral decision-making are illustrated by surveying the influence of Leviticus 18 on restrictions on sexual activity, past and present.³⁴ In its Israelite cultural context, Leviticus 18 emphasized maintaining purity by protecting bodily and group boundaries. That motivation accords poorly with the contemporary Western emphasis on protecting individual autonomy by prohibiting coercive sex. However, both motivations agree on outlawing intercourse among close relatives (incest), differing only over exactly which relationships should be permitted. On the other hand, Lev 18:22 prohibits sex between males (it does not mention females) while the ethic of individual autonomy has led recently to decriminalizing homosexual intercourse in many jurisdictions. But a different set of interpretive trends have manifested around the next verse. Bans on bestiality (sex with animals) in Christian countries, which were inspired by 18:23 and which sodomy laws often conflated with 18:22, were gradually abandoned under the influence of Enlightenment legal reforms, but are now being strengthened again by the moral argument against animal cruelty.³⁵ Thus Leviticus 18 continues to play a role in ethical debates over how to justify restrictions on sex. I leave most of these issues for the more nuanced discussion in the commentary, but I suggest striking through 18:22 and 20:13 because of their continuing and widespread use today to justify violence and discrimination against gays, lesbians, and others with non-hetero-normative sexual orientations.³⁶

33 For a summary and citations of further literature, see Watts, *Leviticus 1–10*, 84–5.

34 Most of the counter-part sex rules in Leviticus 20 that include penalties will already be struck through because they apply the death penalty indiscriminately.

35 For a recent example, see Humane Society Legislative Fund, “U.S. Senate unanimously passes bill to prohibit animal cruelty, bestiality,” December 14, 2017 (http://www.humanesociety.org/news/press_releases/2017/12/PACT-passes-Senate-12142017.html; accessed May 28, 2018).

36 G. D. Comstock, *Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 122–4. Recent news stories include: D. Henry, “West Auckland pastor preaches gay

I do not advocate striking through normative texts simply because modern people no longer follow them. But normative regulations that explicitly mandate violence or that have been used in the past and present to justify oppression should be struck through to mark clearly their moral rejection by congregations and denominations.

5 The Strikethrough Verses

On these criteria, I suggest striking through the mandates for capital punishment for false worship (Lev 20:2, 3–5), sexual offenses (20:10–16), magical practices (20:27), and other capital offenses (20:9; 21:9; 24:14, 16–17, 21b; 27:29), as well as the slave laws (Lev 19:20–22; 25:44–46; 27:2–8), the justifications for genocide (18:24–25, 27; 20:23b–24a), and the purity laws that endorse a double standard for men and women (12:5; 21:7a, 13–15) and that ban gay sex (18:22; 20:13). In other biblical books, verses should also be struck through that endorse indiscriminate capital punishment and taking revenge (Gen 9:6a; Exod 21:12, 14–17, 29c; 22:17–19 [Eng. 22:18–20]; Num 35:16c, 17c, 18c, 19, 21b–c, 27b, 31, 33b; Deut 13:5, 8b–11, 15–16; 17:5, 7, 12–13; 19:12b–13; 21:21–23b; 22:20–25; 24:7b, 16c; Psalm 137:8b–9), genocide (Num 31:2–3, 15–18; 33:52–53, 55; Deut 7:2b, 16a; 20:11, 13–18; 25:17–19), slavery (Gen 9:25, 26c, 27c; Exod 21:2–11, 20–21, 26–27, 32; Deut 15:12, 16–17), and patriarchy (Gen 3:16; Exod 22:15–16 [Eng 22:16–17]; Num 5:11–31; 30:3–16; Deut 21:10–14; 22:28–29; 24:1–4; 25:12). Verses in the Deutero-canon/Apocrypha and New Testament should be struck through that have justified genocide in the form of violent anti-Semitism (Matt 27:24c–25; John 8:44; 1 Thess 2:14c–16), slavery (Eph 6:5–8; Col 3:22–25; Titus 2:9–10; Philemon 8–21; 1 Peter 2:18–21a), persecuting same-sex relations (Rom 1:26–27), and patriarchy in families and in religious communities (Sir 25:24–26; 1 Cor 11:3, 7–10; 14:33b–35; Eph 5:22–24; Col 3:18; 1 Tim 2:11–15; Titus 2:5c “submissive to their husbands”; 1 Peter 3:1–6, 7c “as the weaker vessel”).

Many readers will no doubt judge my strikethroughs as modern overreach. However, though my suggestion to use strikethroughs for this purpose is novel, the editing of biblical texts by scholars is not new. In fact, both Jewish and Christian traditions since ancient times have granted scribes and scholars various

people should be shot,” *The New Zealand Herald*, August 15, 2017 (https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11904818; accessed May 28, 2018); J. Moyo, “Living with HIV and AIDS, and unwelcome in Zimbabwe’s churches,” *Religion News Service*, November 15, 2017 (<https://religionnews.com/2017/11/15/living-with-hiv-and-aids-and-unwelcome-in-zimbabwes-churches/>; accessed May 28, 2018); G. Karol, “Baptist pastor stands by anti-gay Orlando shooting sermon,” *ABC 10*, June 15, 2016 (<https://www.abc10.com/article/news/local/sacramento/baptist-pastor-stands-by-anti-gay-orlando-shooting-sermon/243921283>; accessed May 28, 2018).

means for editing their sacred texts. Suspected additions have been marked in the margins of manuscripts, while rubrication has been used to emphasize especially significant verses (such as the words of Jesus in red-letter bibles). Modern scholars have rearranged biblical texts to match their literary reconstructions.³⁷ Religious traditions have also placed restrictions on reading certain scriptural texts. The ancient rabbis restricted study of the *merkaba* texts of Ezekiel to only the most advanced scholars.³⁸ They also prohibited translating certain embarrassing verses in the golden calf story in Exodus.³⁹ The medieval Masoretes preserved the consonantal Hebrew text of the Tanak scrupulously, but noted their corrections in the vowels and marginal comments (*masorah*) that they added to the text, including instructions to read (*qere*) differently than what is written (*kethib*).⁴⁰ Most English translations follow in this tradition of reading something other than what is written by printing “the LORD” rather than transliterating the Hebrew name of God, יהוה (YHWH). Christian lectionaries since antiquity have rendered mute large swaths of the scriptures, including all of the Leviticus texts I listed above, by not including them in weekly or even daily readings for liturgies.⁴¹ The Protestant Reformers segregated parts of the Christian Old Testament that do not appear in the Jewish Tanak as a separate section of the Bible, the Apocrypha, and considered it of secondary authority. Later publishers unilaterally decided to drop the Apocrypha from most Protestant bibles, thereby omitting roughly 17% of what had been Christian scripture.⁴²

Such modifications to the biblical text are modeled by the biblical writers and editors themselves, most obviously in the Chronicler’s additions and deletions to Samuel-Kings and Luke’s editing and supplementing of Mark’s Gospel. The Pentateuch even models a process of legal revision in several passages, such as when the daughters of Zelophehad complain about their lack of inheritance. God responds by granting inheritance to daughters without brothers (Num 27:9–10).

37 E.g. Exod 22:2–4 in the NEB and NRSV.

38 m. Hag. 2:1. See D. J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel’s Vision* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988).

39 Exod 32:21–25 in m. Meg. 4:10; t. Meg. 3:31–38; y. Meg. 75c; b. Meg. 25a–b, all of which refer to Aaron’s speech in the golden calf story, though their lists of prohibited passages do not quite agree with each other. See L. H. Feldman, “Philo’s Account of the Golden Calf Incident,” *JJS* 56 (2005) 245–64, on pp. 245–46; P. Lindqvist, *Sin at Sinai: Early Judaism Encounters Exodus* 32 (Studies in Rewritten Bible 2; Turku: Åbo Akademi; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 168–9, who pointed out that *Targum Neofiti* seems to have observed a form of the rabbinic proscription (178–80).

40 E. Würthwein/A. A. Fischer, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica* (tr. E. F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 15–38.

41 F. Just, “Lectionary Statistics” on the Roman Catholic *Lectionary for Mass* (2009) (<http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm>).

42 A. E. Hill, “The King James Bible Apocrypha: When and Why Lost?” in D. G. Burke/J. F. Kutsko/P. H. Towner (ed.), *The King James Version at 400: Assessing Its Genius as Bible Translation and Its Literary Influence* (Atlanta: SBL, 2013) 345–58.

However, when tribal leaders complain about possible loss of land because of this legal innovation, Moses restricts the daughter's potential marriage partners to their tribal cousins (Num 36:1–12).⁴³ Legal reasoning and revision were thus features of biblical law, and marking and proscribing deleterious verses has deep precedents in both Jewish and Christian scribal traditions.

While some readers may think my proposal to strike through immoral biblical verses goes too far, others will likely think it does not go far enough. Why not also strike through the many stories about divine and human violence? And why not simply delete offensive verses? Though my list of strikethrough verses includes some curses and rulings in quoted dialogue within narratives, I do not suggest striking through entire stories of the Bible, no matter how violent and terrible. Stories work rhetorically in different ways than explicit norms like commands, laws, instructions, blessings and curses. It is possible to learn positive lessons even from stories of terror, violence, and evil. Besides, it would be the height of hypocrisy for me, a 21st-century American whose culture glorifies and profits from narrating violence in fictional books and films, to presume to pass judgement on the Bible for its violent stories. That discussion is best left to the commentary literature, where moral interpretation has been strengthened in recent decades by feminist and post-colonial critiques.

The situation is very different in the realms of law and morality. Here modern secular culture joins Jewish and Christian ethical reflection in rejecting indiscriminate capital punishment, slavery, genocide and, increasingly, patriarchy. The Bible's visual text should therefore strike through these verses, so that this judgment is immediately apparent to anyone who opens a bible to that page.

I do not propose deleting verses, however. Deleting offensive texts, besides confusing the literary form of biblical books, would whitewash the biblical tradition. It would obscure its complicity in fueling violence within and between religious communities as well as more broadly in the politics and economies of many societies. Deletion would hinder rather than advance the moral education of readers.

Instead, I recommend striking through immoral biblical norms. The strike-through preserves the position of these verses in biblical literature while clearly marking the interpretive traditions' repudiation of their normative force. It is time for the texts of commentaries and of mass-market bibles to strike through verses that justify evil behavior rather than good.

43 Num 27:1–10; 36:1–12. See M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 105; J.W. Watts, *Reading Law: the Rhetorical Shaping of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 105–106. Nevertheless, B.M. Levinson observed correctly that Pentateuchal editors also attempted to conceal their innovations by misquotation or by failing to credit superseded rules to God or by reinterpreting them against their plain meaning ("The Human Voice of Divine Revelation: the Problem of Authority in Biblical Law," in M. A. Williams et al. [ed.] *Innovations in Religious Traditions* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1992] 35–71, on pp. 43–63).

Postscript

As I was finishing this essay, the news broke that 300 French politicians and cultural leaders had issued a manifesto calling for the Qur'an to be edited to eliminate texts that fuel anti-Semitic violence.⁴⁴ Despite superficial similarities to my proposal here, the French manifesto expresses a very different political and moral position. Most obviously, it calls on members of a different religion, Islam, to conform to the standards of its non-Muslim writers. The manifesto obscures the deep and continuing anti-Semitic tendencies in French culture that stem from Christian, not Muslim, roots. The manifesto claims that Catholic culture shed its anti-Semitism through the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), but that is belied by the history of on-going anti-Semitic incidents in France as well as in other majority-Christian countries.⁴⁵ Though very many Christian denominations have disavowed anti-Semitism in the 20th century, just as they disavowed slavery in the 19th, neither the Second Vatican Council nor any other ecclesiastical bodies have modified the text of bibles to constrain their immoral use in justifying violence and oppression.

My proposal calls instead for bible translators and publishers to strike through immoral norms in our own scriptures. The strikethrough marks these norms as abrogated by Christian and Jewish traditions, but leaves them legible to acknowledge the traditions' complicity in perpetuating them.⁴⁶

44 The manifesto recounted the history of recent murders of elderly Jews by Muslim immigrants and emphasized the vital role of Jewish contributions to French culture. Its second-to-last paragraph then demanded: "Nous demandons que les versets du Coran appelant au meurtre et au châtement des juifs, des chrétiens et des incroyants soient frappés d'obsolescence par les autorités théologiques, comme le furent les incohérences de la Bible et l'antisémitisme catholique aboli par Vatican II, afin qu'aucun croyant ne puisse s'appuyer sur un texte sacré pour commettre un crime" ("Manifeste 'contre le nouvel antisémitisme,'" *Le Parisien*, April 21, 2018 [<http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/manifeste-contre-le-nouvel-antisemitisme-21-04-2018-7676787.php>; accessed May 5, 2018]).

45 "Anti-Semitism Worldwide 2017," Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry, Tel Aviv University (http://kantorcenter.tau.ac.il/sites/default/files/Doch_full_2018_110418.pdf; accessed May 14, 2018).

46 This essay has benefitted from the comments and encouragement of Nicole Ruane, William K. Gilders, Thomas Hieke and Christian A. Eberhart, to whom I am very grateful. Of course, I alone am responsible for its contents and arguments.

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