

# 'Not My People': Jewish-Christian Ethics and Divine Reversals in Response to Injustice

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## §1 INTRODUCTION

In the Hebrew Scriptures, several of the consequences for disobedience to God are familiar—destruction of holy sites, slavery, exile from the land, and death. However, there is a particular consequence that is less familiar to casual readers and of special interest in this paper. Disobedience to God sometimes, though not always, results in stark, devastating reversals in God's very relationship and experiential availability to the people whom God otherwise purportedly favors (e.g., in the sense of *election*).

This is a curious form of punishment that not only threatens the very spiritual identity of the victims of the reversal, but—at least for a time—cuts off their only plausible route to experience of and reconciliation with God.

This paper examines the category of divine reversal in the Hebrew Scriptures (and its continuation in the New Testament) and suggests some applications for understanding the contemporary relationship between social and religious groups and God, in particular as these relationships involve moral problems. I use two main examples: first, the relationship between the Jewish people and *Eretz Yisrael* [Land of Israel]; and second, the relationship between the Church, gender, and sexuality. These are highly contentious topics, but that is why I have selected them. For purposes of illustration and argument, it is essential that I assume that the conservative wings of the Synagogue and the Church are correct in their positions on these

topics. This assumption is crucial, because one main aim of my reflection is to show that *even if* such positions are theologically or morally correct in the abstract, this does not settle the question of how God will relate to the issues and groups in question.

Sometimes, the justification for these divine reversals is precisely the relational effects that the injustices have on the victim groups' own actual and potential relationship to God. Whether and how the victims of the self-identified people of God will themselves experience God is imperiled by the injustices that they endure. As the Apostle Paul adapts the Hebrew Scriptures in his letter to the congregation in Rome, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Romans 2:24; cf. Isaiah 52:5). Moreover, some of Jesus’ own harshest words are reserved for anyone who is responsible for what otherwise would be considered the failings of others: “It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea” (Luke 17:2).

To spoil the ending, insofar as the self-identified people of God commit positive injustices against others, and even insofar as they are culpable for failing to prevent such injustices from occurring, devotees of the Hebrew Scriptures—so, devout Jews and Christians alike—ought to take seriously the possibility that God will, in ways that might seem shocking and offensive, side with those who suffer the injustices and even, in a sense, sanctify their practices. Such divine reversals pose a special problem for Jewish and Christian ethics, which must grapple with the possibility that God will seem, from the point of view of the Synagogue or Church, to adopt inconsistent moral positions across time. The phenomenon of divine reversal generally complicates our understanding of the relationship between the will of God and Jewish/Christian ethics.

## §2     THREE KINDS OF DIVINE REVERSAL

It is worth setting aside certain kinds of reversal that are not of interest to me in this paper. First, consider the reversal characteristic of a *change of mind*. Perhaps the most famous (for some, notorious) instance of an apparent divine change of mind in the Hebrew Scriptures is in Genesis.

The LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the LORD regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened. The LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them" (6:5-7).

Although regret is a kind of reversal, it is not what I have in mind here. In regret, there is a change of belief or attitude, a wishing that one had not done something.

A second kind of reversal is the violation of human expectations. In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, there is a prominent theme of tension between divine and human values. This is a kind of reversal—human beings expect that  $p$ , but God asserts or makes it the case that  $\sim p$ —but it is, once again, not what I have in mind in this paper.

Both of these kinds of reversal overlap but are not identical to divine reversal in the sense of this paper. The sort of reversal I have in mind is a non-regretful reversal of God's own commitments and pronouncements, but especially as they pertain to God's relationship with God's ostensibly chosen people. A few salient passages can illustrate what I have in mind when I talk about reversals in God's relationships. On the one hand, a Psalmist writes, "For the LORD will not forsake his people; He will not abandon His very own" (Psalm 94:14). Yet, God declares in the prophet Amos that, due to their transgressions, the same people "shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east to seek the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it" (Amos 8:12). Such reversals sometimes go in the other direction, extending to groups that are otherwise enemies of God's chosen people. Babylon, for example, is sometimes favored for divine purposes, so much so that its own actions are identified with divine action. "I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon and put My sword in his

hand,” God declares in Ezekiel 30:24. In Jeremiah 21:5, *in response to a plea from Jerusalem for divine help*, God promises instead to “battle against [Jerusalem] with an outstretched mighty arm,” implicitly identifying God’s arm with the forces of Babylon, which would lay siege to the city.

To understand the potential offense of this kind of reversal for those who self-identify as belonging to God, we must contemplate what it would be like for synagogues or churches to be told that they are—at least for a time—not God’s people; that even were they to seek out God’s presence in earnest, God would not respond to them; and that the successes, oftentimes violent, of the groups that they perceive to be enemies are actually actions of their God.

Part of what is interesting about divine reversals is that they seem to involve God acting or speaking in ways that are contrary to what would *prima facie* make sense, *given* other things that God has done or done. Given God’s promises to never forsake Israel, for example, it would *prima facie* make sense that, even when Israel commits injustices, God would patiently remain with Israel—and, certainly, would still respond to those who “seek the word of the LORD.” Given that Israel and not Babylon is God’s chosen nation, it would *prima facie* make sense for God to defend Israel from Babylon—and, certainly, to do so when Israel cries for God’s help.

### §3 TWO EXAMPLES

#### 3.1 *The Jewish people and Eretz Yisrael*

The term “Zionism” is a matter of considerable controversy in contemporary politics, and so it is necessary to spend a moment clarifying how I will be using the term. “Zionism” is probably most commonly used to refer to a distinctly nationalistic and even secular ideology, whose core tenants involve the establishment and maintenance of a recognizably Jewish state

on largely political and humanistic grounds. However, I will be using “Zionism” in the sense of the distinctly *religious* Zionism that involves the combination of Orthodox Judaism with the basic commitments of a more secular Zionism. Religious Zionism says, in essence, that the land that currently constitutes the nation-state of Israel is part of what was promised to the Jewish people by God (*Eretz Yisrael*), and, crucially, that it is rightfully theirs on this basis. Even if the other political and moral arguments for Zionism were not cogent, God’s promises would still, on this view, be sufficient grounds for the Zionist project. One of the main differences between secular and religious Zionism, then, has to do with the justifications given for the core view. But there are significant differences in practical upshot as well. For instance, a religious Zionist will, for obvious reasons, be considerably more likely to advocate for explicitly expansionist national ambitions, on the grounds of the Biblical texts foundational to the view.

Whatever one thinks about the plausibility of religious Zionism, it is natural to think that the central question about it is or would be over the factual question: *does God really promise Eretz Israel to the Jewish people?*

Although it is natural to think that this is the central question for anyone wondering about religious Zionism, it is worth asking why this is so. It seems to me that the naturalness of the question stems from the fact that *if* God really does promise Eretz Israel to the Jewish people, then this is morally significant for us here and now. The moral significance can be easily seen by reflecting on God’s nature. If God is both omniscient and necessarily good, then if God approvingly promises that  $x$  *shall belong to S*, it would seem to follow that it would be good for  $S$  to possess  $x$ . More vividly, suppose you are arguing with someone over whether some bit of property is yours or theirs, and they demonstrably show that God has declared that it is theirs (perhaps by successfully beckoning God’s voice, or by producing a compelling

passage from a text you both recognize as authoritative). Putting it mildly, your opponent has produced very good evidence for their claim.<sup>1</sup>

Here is where the sort of divine reversal prominent in the Hebrew Scriptures complicates matters. The fact that God has in some sense delivered *Eretz Israel* to the Jewish people is in fact not a sufficient condition for their rightful possession of it.<sup>2</sup> Those living in fidelity to the Jewish tradition must regard it as possible that God may (temporarily) reverse fulfillment even of God's most central promises: this certainly includes the promise of land. In the Hebrew Scriptures, when God's people do not meet certain conditions, God seems to allow the very thing promised (the land) to be taken away. Interestingly, this is never taken to mean that God's promises are no longer true; it suggests, rather, that God's promises are reliable yet somehow conditional. So, it can simultaneously be the case that *God promises x to S* and *God takes x away from S*. It can even be the case that *God gives x to S\**, where *S* and *S\** are different groups of people (e.g., Israel and Babylon).

This has dramatic consequences for religious debates over the Israel-Palestine conflict. Suppose two interlocutors are debating the question whether Israel has a right to this or that part of the land, or whether Israel is behaving justly. A religious Zionist may be inclined to offer religious arguments in favor of God's having promised the land to the Jewish people, and these arguments will seem especially cogent if the religious Zionist's interlocutor is at least committed to an overlapping, if not identical, theological framework. However, the possibility of divine reversal should worry the religious Zionist, because the possibility of reversal places a wedge between God's purported promises and questions of rights and justice. The religious

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, within Jewish tradition, such evidence is in fact defeasible and, if the debated proposition is one of *halacha* (Jewish law), possibly even irrelevant. See one of the most famous and foundational texts from the Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 59a-b.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is also not a necessary condition, provided that there can be secular grounds for rightful possession of land. But this is less surprising than the sufficiency claim.

Zionist's interlocutor may cogently say, "Perhaps God has indeed promised *Eretz Yisrael* to the Jewish people, but that in no ways guarantees even so much as rightful possession or justice here and now."

Now, I take no stand in this paper as to whether religious Zionism, political Zionism, some form of anti-Zionism, etc., is correct with respect to the Israel-Palestine conflict. That would not only be beyond the scope of this paper, but well beyond the scope of my own expertise. The point here is simply to emphasize that a prominent theme in the Hebrew Scriptures—divine reversal in the sense specified in the previous section—should give pause to anyone offering typical arguments in favor of religious Zionism. Intuitively, "with God on our side" we have nothing to worry about, but the possibility of divine reversal makes conceptual room for God's being on our side—yet against us for the time being, because of what we have done.

### 3.2 *The Church, Gender, and Sexuality*

Some of the intra-Christian debate about gender and sexuality structurally resembles the debate about religious Zionism. Whatever one thinks about the plausibility of conservative Christian views on traditional gender norms and sexual life, it is natural to think that the central question about it for Christians is or would be over the factual question: *does God really command a traditional sexual ethic?*

Divine reversal in the New Testament is presented in a different mode than in the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> Whereas God's relationship to human beings is largely presented *via*

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<sup>3</sup> See Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*. While I disagree with Hazony's apparently hellenized (and, hence, apparently dejudaized) reading of the New Testament, I agree with his characterization of the Hebrew Scriptures as offering philosophical arguments in narrative form, and of the New Testament as something more in the genre of proclamation.

sweeping narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament relies much more heavily on explicit didactic teaching.

To illustrate the concept of divine reversal as it might apply to the New Testament and contemporary debates around Christian views of gender and sexuality, it is useful to draw on a somewhat fraught comparison between how conservative Christians view LGBTQ individuals and how the religious leaders of Jesus' day viewed tax collectors, prostitutes, and other "sinners". Even suggesting a comparison between LGBTQ individuals, on the one hand, and the New Testament's categories of sexual and other sinners, on the other, risks immediate offense. So, one must be careful to bear in mind the narrow purpose of the comparison. Remember that I am assuming for the sake of argument that the conservative position on contemporary issues of gender and sexuality is *correct*. My aim here is to develop a challenge that arises from *within* that perspective, just as my aim in the previous subsection was to develop a challenge that arises from *within* a religious Zionist perspective. The point here is not to say that LGBTQ individuals *really are* in the same category—morally, spiritually, or otherwise—as the New Testament's various "sinners". The point is that, *from the standpoint of the conservative Christian position on gender and sexual ethics*, the comparison would hold.

So, from an intra-Christian point of view, it is natural to think that the central question for anyone wondering about the conservative Christian gender and sexual ethic is whether God really wills it. As with religious Zionism, the naturalness of this thought stems from the fact that *if* God really does will a conservative ethic, then this is morally significant for us here and now. As before, the moral significance seems obvious from reflection on God's nature. If God is both omniscient and necessarily good, then if God approvingly wills that *p*, it would seem to follow that it would be good if *p*. Suppose you are arguing with someone over whether some gender self-identification or sexual choice is right for a person, and they demonstrate

that God has declared that it is not (perhaps by successfully beckoning God's voice, or by producing a compelling passage from a text you both recognize as authoritative). As before, it seems that your opponent has produced very good evidence for their claim.

But God's favoring of a particular gender or sexual ethic does not settle the question of who is rightly related to God on this issue. With all of this in mind, consider the following pronouncement of Jesus, from the Gospel of Matthew:

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him (21:31-32).

Jesus speaks these words to an audience that is presumed by the text to be on the *right side* of moral questions regarding tax collection and prostitution. In this case, it seems that what makes the difference is belief in the preaching of John the Baptist, not correctness on moral questions regarding tax collection and prostitution. But the general theme of surprising results with respect to who enters "the kingdom of heaven" is persistent in Jesus' teaching. Notice that Jesus even accuses the religious leaders of positively *blocking* entrance into the Kingdom of God, *despite* their being correct on matters of doctrine and morals. In a passage from the Gospel of Matthew, these two statements are put virtually one after the other in the text:

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. . . .

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them" (23:1-4, 13).

Much can be said about these passages, of course, and the point of this paper is not to engage in New Testament exegesis. The point is to simply issue a kind of warning or challenge regarding the relationship between being right about some moral or other matters, on the one hand, and being in right relationship to God with respect to that issue, on the other. The New

Testament continues the theme in the Hebrew Scriptures of divine reversal when it comes to who is favored vis-à-vis moral questions, including those of gender and sexual ethics.

Applying this to the case at hand, Christians should acknowledge that it can simultaneously be the case that the conservative Christian gender and sexual ethic is formally correct, yet it still be the case that the piety of those who follow the ethics is regarded by God as worthless, and that those who do not follow the ethic “are going into the Kingdom of God” before those who do. Moreover, a devout Christian should worry that holding to and even teaching the correct ethic is compatible with “lock[ing] people out of the kingdom of heaven.” This latter, haunting concept suggests that a person’s distance from God and God’s will may be attributable to someone other than themselves; indeed, it may be attributable to oppressions and burdens that they face precisely from those who are correct about God and God’s will!

This has dramatic consequences for religious debates over gender and sexual ethics. Suppose two interlocutors are debating the question whether non-conforming gender identities are compatible with God’s will, or whether the Church oppresses people with non-heterosexual sexual orientations. A conservative Christian may be inclined to offer religious arguments in favor of God’s willing a conservative ethic, and these arguments will seem especially cogent if the conservative Christian’s interlocutor is at least committed to an overlapping, if not identical, theological framework. However, the possibility of divine reversal should worry the conservative Christian, because the possibility of reversal places a wedge between God’s purported will and questions of gender and sexual obligations. The conservative Christian’s interlocutor may cogently say, “Perhaps God has indeed willed a conservative ethic, but that in no ways guarantees that those living and speaking according to the ethic are closer to God than those who are not.”

Now, I take no stand in this paper as to whether a conservative, liberal, or some other position is correct with respect to Christian approaches to gender and sexuality. The point here is simply to emphasize that a prominent theme in both the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament should give pause to anyone offering typical arguments in favor of a conservative gender and sexual ethic. Intuitively, God's will is an ethical trump card, but the possibility of divine reversal makes conceptual room for somehow holding all the right cards—yet, in the end, being on the losing end of the issue.

#### **§4 LESSONS FOR APPLIED ETHICS FROM A JEWISH-CHRISTIAN POINT OF VIEW**

It is natural for devout Jewish and Christian theists to think that debates in applied ethics are or would be settled by successful appeals to timeless divine commands. Although the traditional framework of divine command theory can justify this thought *via* God's commands constituting what is good or right, one need not be a divine command theorist to have it. Even if God is not the origin or ground of moral truths, God's goodness and knowledge guarantee that God's commands and moral assertions are consistent with moral truth. If God wills some morally evaluable  $p$ , then it must be good that  $p$ .

But the possibility of divine reversal means that someone may both be right that God wills that  $p$  yet wrong that those who are living and speaking in accordance with the truth that  $p$  are in that respect in right relation to God. Israel's injustices sometimes made God reject their sacrifices—even though such sacrifices were offered in accordance with the Torah. The often-times impeccable piety of the religious leaders of Jesus' day did not yield the *prima facie* appropriate hierarchies in the eyes of God. The first lesson to learn, then, is that correctness about doctrine and morals can be pulled apart from divine favor, even divine favor with respect to those very matters that one is correct about.

A second lesson is that just as religious epistemology should be informed by a view of the *purposes* of knowledge, religious ethics should be informed by a view of the *purposes* of action.<sup>4</sup> As many authors have pointed out, for example, a conservative Christian gender and sexual ethic is plausibly motivated by many *underlying ends*—faithfulness, imaging God, protecting children, and so on—that may nevertheless be harmed in a conservative context and pursued in a non-conservative context. It may very well be that, even if the conservative position is correct on these matters, its correctness is nevertheless not more important in practical situations than the values that undergird it. Hence, although it may seem paradoxical from the conservative point of view, God may in some contexts bless, sanctify, or otherwise favor what the conservative opposes.

Third, more work needs to be done on what it means that God might command or promise something at time  $t$ , and then seem to temporarily reverse matters at time  $t+1$ . As another example of divine reversal, consider this peculiar proclamation from the prophet Jeremiah:

[W]hen I freed your fathers from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice. But this is what I commanded them: Do My bidding, that I may be your God and you may be My people; walk only in the way that I enjoin upon you, that it may go well with you (7:22-23).

This passage is surprising, because God is said to have commanded burnt offerings and sacrifices at precisely the time in question.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it appears in the context of a familiar theme from the Hebrew Scriptures, that there is a hierarchy of divine ethical concern, with

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<sup>4</sup> On how the purposes of religious knowledge should shape religious epistemology, see especially Paul Moser, *The Elusive God*.

<sup>5</sup> There is scholarly debate about whether this passage represents a separate textual/intellectual tradition from that which produced the text that clearly do involve burnt offerings and sacrifices at the time of the Exodus (cf. Leviticus 7:37-38). However, this would not explain why the compilers and editors of the Hebrew Scriptures maintained this text as-is.

justice, care for strangers, orphans, and widows, at the top, and concerns about sacrifices and cultic practices generally below those.<sup>6</sup>

## §5      OBJECTIONS AND CONCERNs

*But this still doesn't bear on the truth—and isn't that what debates over Zionism and Christian ethics are ultimately all about?*

First, that is not what these debates are *all* about. We should care about the truth, but we should also care about the fundamental values that undergird the importance of seeking the truth on any particular matter. For all I've said, at the end of the day, the conservative Jewish position on religious Zionism and the conservative Christian position on gender and sexual ethics could be true. But this is not a problem for anything I've said in this paper, because my point has been that the possibility of divine reversal should worry even those who have things right by their own lights. Second, the questions of this paper to some extent *do* bear on the truth. For instance, even if, in some ultimate sense, God wills a particular, narrow model of human gender or sexual life, it may be that, *for the time being*, God not only permits but sanctifies alternative models that serve the underlying values at issue.

*Both examples in this paper challenge positions favored by conservative wings of Judaism and Christianity, respectively. Do “liberals” in these traditions face these challenges equally?*

I see no reason why liberal Jews and Christians—provided that they are theistic realists—should not be equally concerned that being factually correct in their liberalism is insufficient for God's really being on their side. Religious Zionism and conservative Christian perspectives on gender and sexuality just happen to be presently contentious topics where the issues of this paper arise in a direct and straightforward manner. For any debate where someone thinks that God is on their side, the chief lesson of this paper is that this does not

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<sup>6</sup> Hence, when Jesus cites Hosea 6:6 (“I desire goodness, not sacrifice; obedience to God, rather than burn offerings”) at Matthew 9:13 to the same end, he is speaking squarely within the Jewish prophetic tradition. Cf. Yohanan ben Zakkai’s use of the passage in *Avot of Rabbi Nathan*, ch. 4.

settle the debate in their favor. If they are committing injustice, for example, in a way that directly implicates the debate, then devout Jews and Christians should see divine reversal as a real possibility.

*Divine reversals really just amount to conditional promises or commitments, typically in the context of covenant. When God promises the land to the Jewish people, for instance, the promise comes with conditions of behavior.*

Even if translated into the languages of covenant and conditional promises, acknowledgement of the possibility of divine reversal would radically reshape debate on issues like the two discussed in §3. In a debate about possession of *Eretz Yisrael*, for instance, “God has promised this to me” is far more decisive than “God has promised this to me provided that I practice justice, care for the stranger, ...”. So, I’m somewhat amenable to the incorporation of the ideas of this paper into the standard language of covenant and promise rather than the somewhat more idiosyncratic notion of divine reversal.

However, I’m still partial to the choice to conceptualize the phenomenon in terms of divine reversal. In a Jewish and Christian context, ethical debates have an upshot with respect to where and how one stands in relation to God and God’s will. The language of covenant and promise undersells the dramatic nature of one’s failure totally reversing one’s relationship to God.

## §6 CONCLUSION

In summary, Jews and Christians seeking to engage in applied ethical debate in which reference to God’s will is fair game and, moreover, to do so in fidelity to a conception of God founded in traditional sources, must take seriously the fact that the *prima facie* warrant provided by even a successful appeal to God’s will may be defeated by one’s own failing to live in ways that reflect the values that undergird the very idea that one is right about. This fact is, or should

be, especially salient in cases where one stands in an oppressive relationship to those whose lives one is speaking about.