

Biblical Morality: Unchanging Divine Mandate or Cultural Evolution? — 06

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Central claim

Readers who treat the Bible as a sufficiently clear transhistorical moral code of divine origin should expect its canon, despite human mediation, to supply recoverable rules about which directives bind whom and why. Across four diagnostic cases, status-bound rules, competing moral voices, changing covenant markers, and durable informed disagreement are more expected under historically situated human production than under the strong divine-mandate model. The evidence therefore favors the human-cultural comparator in these domains, while accommodation, progressive revelation, and other mediated-divine models remain open only where they add independent expectations.

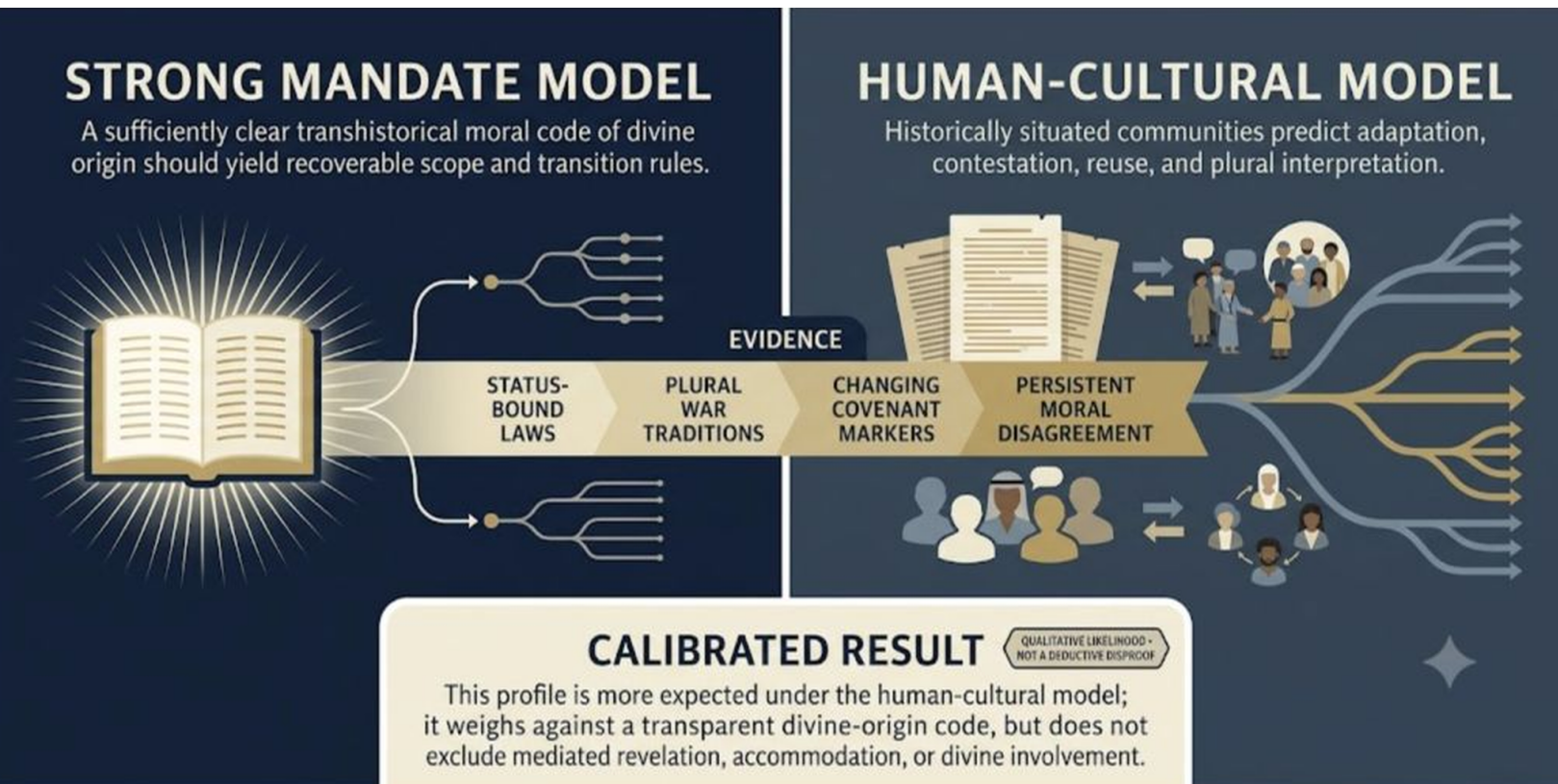
Preview: Argument at a glance

Governing claim	Expected implication	Evidence or pressure	Rational conclusion
A strong divine mandate should yield publicly recoverable moral guidance	The canon should identify scope, transition, and authority rules clearly enough for central convergence	Four stress tests show status-bound rules, plural voices, changing markers, and durable good-faith disagreement	This profile favors human-cultural production; mediated-divine alternatives need independent predictions

A qualitative comparison pressures a transparent-code model; it does not disprove theism or mediated revelation.

The inference is qualitative and contrastive: it tests a strong public-guidance claim rather than theism as such, and cultural evolution means socially transmitted change rather than inevitable moral progress.

Visual preview:



The infographic compares the strong divine-mandate and human-cultural models across four diagnostic evidence clusters. It visualizes the same limited conclusion as the table: the observed profile favors the human-cultural model without excluding independently specified forms of accommodation or mediated revelation.

Abstract

Is the Bible's moral diversity better explained by an unchanging divine mandate or by historically situated cultural development? A *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity. The target here is a strong one: a perfect, unchanging deity intends the canon, through human mediation, to provide sufficiently clear and reliable transhistorical moral guidance. The comparator treats the canon as a collection produced, edited, and authorized by historically situated communities without a guarantee of uniform or readily recoverable moral content. Across four purposively selected stress tests—status-bound laws, plural war traditions, changing covenant markers, and durable underdetermination in later Christian moral interpretation—a qualitative likelihood analysis finds the joint profile more expected under the human-cultural model. The result weighs against Scripture as a transparent transhistorical moral code and favors historically situated human production within those domains. The analysis neither treats the clusters as statistically independent nor identifies a unique mechanism of cultural transmission. Progressive revelation, accommodation, covenant differentiation, canonical synthesis, and divine-discourse accounts can absorb much of the evidence, but they gain evidential force only from criteria specified apart from the disputed classifications themselves. Broader forms of mediated divine involvement therefore remain underdetermined rather than disproved.

Keywords: biblical ethics; cultural evolution; divine mandate; progressive revelation; accommodation; hermeneutics; likelihood

1. The Explanatory Question

Readers who invoke the Bible as a clear public moral authority should face its diversity before appealing to divine origin. Across the four stress tests developed below, historically situated human production predicts the observed mixture of status-bound rules, competing moral voices, later reinterpretation, and persistent disagreement better than a strong divine-mandate model does. This conclusion does not refute theism or every account of mediated revelation. It places the burden on any divine model to say in advance which transition rules, degree of clarity, and possible counterevidence it predicts.

The Bible does not present one genre, one historical setting, or one unmediated list of rules. It contains law, narrative, prophecy, wisdom, gospel, letter, apocalypse, and later editorial arrangement. Its texts distinguish Israelites from foreigners, priests from laypersons, women from men, enslaved persons from slaveholders, and covenant insiders from outsiders. They also preserve arguments, reforms, countervoices, and reinterpretations. Any explanatory comparison must take this plurality as data rather than begin by flattening it.

The phrase *unchanging divine mandate* is therefore ambiguous. It can mean only that the specified deity's character is immutable; it can mean that some moral truths remain constant while their applications differ; or it can mean that Scripture supplies a stable, sufficiently clear code for human beings across time and culture. Only the third claim directly predicts textual and interpretive uniformity. Divine immutability by itself does not entail that every audience receives the same instruction. A teacher may have a constant purpose while assigning different tasks, and a covenantal theology may distinguish administrations without positing change in the deity.

The phrase *cultural evolution* also invites confusion. In the relevant social-scientific sense, it names processes by which socially learned representations and practices vary, spread, persist, recombine, and disappear. It does not imply genetic determination, a single ladder from primitive to advanced, or reliable improvement. Cultural transmission can conserve harmful practices, revive older forms, generate local innovations, and move in several directions at once (Richerson & Boyd, 2005). Biblical morality need not display a smooth ascent from tribal exclusion to universal compassion in order to bear the marks of cultural evolution.

The question is consequently comparative and limited: *which model makes the observed mixture of continuity, scope restriction, contestation, and interpretive instability less surprising?* Answering it does not require an independent moral verdict on every biblical norm. A moral realist, anti-realist, divine-command theorist, or constructivist can all ask how well a proposed source model predicts the textual record.

Target of assessment. The argument tests Scripture as a sufficiently clear transhistorical moral guide. It does not infer textual uniformity from divine immutability alone, and it does not treat every theology of inspiration as committed to a flat code.

2. Models, Evidence, and Auxiliary Assumptions

Let D_S denote the *strong mandate model*: the perfect and unchanging deity specified by the target God-concept intended the biblical canon, through human authors and recognized genres, to provide a sufficiently reliable public guide to central moral requirements across cultures and eras. “Sufficiently reliable” does not mean that every verse is a timeless command, that no interpretation is required, or that a reader needs no historical knowledge. It means that the intended moral guidance and the rule for distinguishing enduring requirements from local instructions are recoverable by the relevant interpretive community with enough stability to perform the transhistorical function claimed for the canon.

Let H_C denote the *human-cultural model*: the biblical corpus was composed, edited, transmitted, and canonized by historically situated communities whose norms responded to local institutions, identities, conflicts, and inherited traditions, without positing a special guarantee of uniform moral content or a uniquely authorized decision procedure. This is a family-level historical model, not a claim that one particular transmission bias or selection mechanism has been established. It allows moral insight, criticism, innovation, and long-range coherence. Human cultural production is not synonymous with confusion or vice, and using H_C for evidential comparison does not by itself assert metaphysical naturalism.

The evidence profile E contains four broad, potentially dependent patterns: (1) directives whose scope and protections vary by status or covenant membership; (2) multiple ethical voices concerning war, power, and treatment of outsiders; (3) canonical revision or relaxation of earlier identity markers; and (4) persistent good-faith disagreement over which norms bind later communities. Each pattern needs interpretation, and their common historical causes make statistical independence implausible. The comparison therefore includes auxiliary assumptions A_D and A_C about genre, redaction, audience, historical setting, and what each model counts as guidance. Hiding those assumptions would make either model appear more predictive than it is.

This framing deliberately avoids a false dichotomy. A mediated-inspiration model may combine divine purpose with extensive human cultural production. Such a hybrid can be compared with D_S and H_C , but it must specify what extra expectations divine involvement adds. If it predicts every pattern that ordinary cultural production predicts and no independently identifiable difference, the historical evidence will not discriminate between them.

The governing inference can be stated without technical notation:

- P1.** Evidence favors one model over another when the observed record is more expected under the first model, other things being adequately specified.
- P2.** The strong mandate model predicts recoverable scope, transition, and authority rules sufficient for central transhistorical guidance.
- P3.** The human-cultural model predicts local scope, contested voices, reuse, revision, and dependence on later communities without a specially guaranteed decision rule.
- P4.** Across the selected stress tests, the observed profile fits the third expectation better than the second.
- C.** Therefore, within these domains, the evidence favors the human-cultural model over the strong mandate model while leaving broader mediated-divine alternatives open for separate assessment.

The final step follows from the comparative principle in P1. The substantive judgment in P4 remains inductive: its force depends on the quality of the textual interpretation, the model definitions, and the alternatives considered.

Case-selection limit.

The four clusters are purposive stress tests because they expose scope changes, competing voices, and disputed transition rules. They are not a random or representative sample of every biblical moral teaching. The warranted inference is therefore diagnostic and contrastive within these domains, not an estimate of how often the whole canon is clear, uniform, or innovative.

Figure 1 makes the comparison's structure visible: the evidence bears on specified model packages, while accommodation and progressive revelation remain separate alternatives whose added expectations must be assessed rather than assumed.

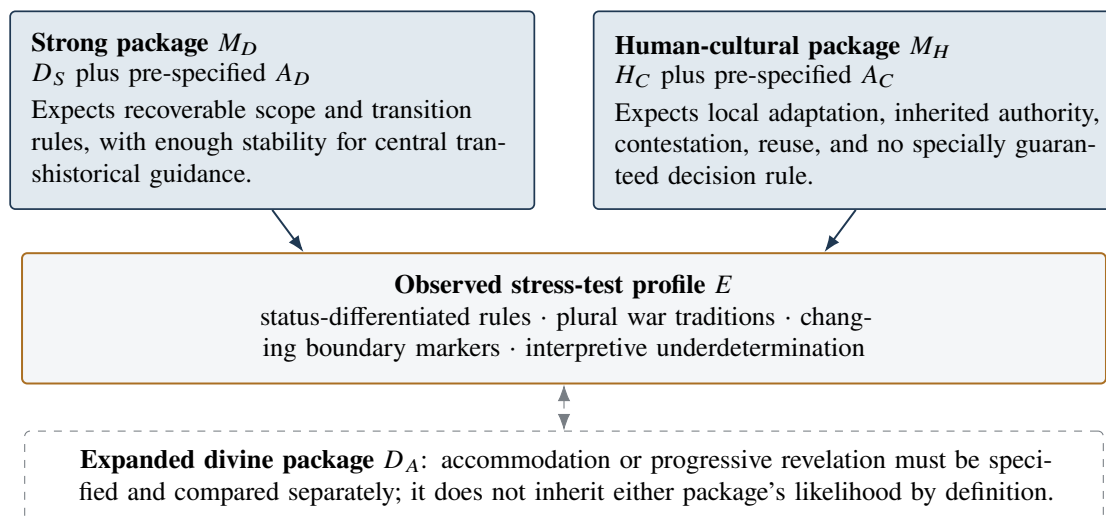


Figure 1: The evidence compares specified model packages, not theism with atheism. The arrows represent qualitative expectations rather than measured probabilities, and D_A remains a separate alternative.

3. What the Textual Record Looks Like

3.1 Slavery: regulation, status, and later moral distance

Slavery supplies a demanding test because the canonical materials do not merely mention an external institution. They regulate relationships within slaveholding societies. Exodus 21:2–11 distinguishes Hebrew debt service from other arrangements. Leviticus 25:39–46 forbids treating impoverished Israelites as slaves while allowing male and female slaves to be acquired from surrounding nations and inherited as property. Exodus 21:20–21 makes the legal treatment of a master's violence partly depend on whether the enslaved person dies immediately. These rules also contain limits and protections; the relevant point is not that they are maximally cruel, but that their moral architecture accepts differentiated status and ownership as part of the regulated world.

New Testament texts do not simply repeat the Torah's legal scheme. Yet household instructions tell enslaved believers to obey masters (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22; 1 Pet. 2:18), while masters receive reciprocal admonitions. Philemon presses for transformed reception of Onesimus as more than a slave and as a beloved brother, and Galatians 3:28 denies that slave/free status determines standing in Christ. These are morally important countercurrents, but they do not amount to an explicit institutional prohibition. Glancy's historical study emphasizes how deeply early Christian rhetoric and practice remained embedded in a slaveholding social world (Glancy, 2002).

Several descriptions of this record are possible. A theological reader may see regulated accommodation followed by a redemptive trajectory. Webb develops a detailed cultural-analysis or redemptive-movement hermeneutic precisely because direct repetition of the surface instruction is inadequate (Webb, 2001). A historical reader may see different communities working within and gradually revising inherited institutions. Both descriptions

acknowledge development. The discriminating issue is whether the direction and endpoint can be derived from the canon by a clear, independently warranted rule, or whether later moral judgments select and extend some trajectories over others.

The diagnostic pressure does not arise merely because slavery is regulated. A defender of D_S may regard differentiated rules as just for their setting. The pressure comes from the combination of status-based regulation, morally significant countercurrents, the absence of an explicit canonical abolition, and the later need to identify which trajectory controls. The case therefore tests the recoverability of transition rules rather than assuming the conclusion from a present moral verdict.

3.2 War: a plurality of ideologies, not one simple contradiction

Deuteronomy 20:16–18 commands the destruction of the inhabitants of specified cities, and 1 Samuel 15:3 attributes to the biblical deity a command that explicitly includes children and infants. Other texts constrain warfare, depict its costs, celebrate peace, or withdraw from violent participation. In the New Testament, Matthew 5:44 commands love of enemies, while Revelation retains forceful images of divine judgment. The canon therefore presents a moral range, not a single line from violence to nonviolence.

It would be invalid to infer a formal contradiction merely by placing an ancient war command beside enemy-love. The directives have different speakers, audiences, literary settings, and proposed scopes. A contradiction emerges only after adding bridge premises that make both universal and simultaneous. The evidential point is subtler: a corpus intended as a transhistorical moral guide must supply a warranted way to identify which voice, scope, or canonical trajectory governs later conduct.

Historical scholarship finds multiple war ideologies within the Hebrew Bible, including the ban, divine justice, expediency, critique, and nonparticipation (Niditch, 1993). Theological interpretation likewise offers multiple serious responses: defend the command, read the language as conventional hyperbole, reevaluate the attribution to the biblical deity, locate the episode within progressive revelation, or revise the doctrine of Scripture. Trimm's recent survey presents this plurality as a live field of biblical and theological interpretation rather than a solved problem (Trimm, 2022). That diversity does not prove that no answer exists. It is evidence that the answer is not delivered by the bare text without substantial hermeneutical mediation.

3.3 Boundary markers and changing obligations

The Bible's moral and ritual worlds cannot always be separated by a rule stated in the texts themselves. Leviticus 11 embeds food restrictions in holiness and communal identity. Acts 10 reworks food and purity imagery in the admission of Gentiles, while Romans 14 treats the observance of days and eating practices as matters on which believers may differ. Paul's argument in Galatians 5:2–6 makes circumcision nonbinding for Gentile incorporation and treats reliance on it as theologically dangerous. These changes are not a simple rejection of the Torah; they are canonical reinterpretations prompted by a new account of covenant membership.

Covenant differentiation can explain why instructions vary. But the explanation alters the original universality criterion. The relevant expectation is no longer that every command binds everyone. It becomes a higher-order expectation: the canon should make sufficiently clear which instructions are covenant-specific, which express enduring requirements, which are typological or fulfilled, and who is authorized to decide. Persistent Christian disagreement shows that this sorting rule is not mechanically available; it does not show that no tradition can supply a reasoned or coherent rule.

3.4 Plurality without a progress myth

Claims that the Bible moves uniformly from tribal exclusivity to universal inclusion are too crude. Universal concern appears in early materials, and exclusionary or hierarchical patterns appear in later ones. The Hebrew Bible can both distinguish Israel sharply and imagine blessing for the nations. The New Testament can proclaim

equal standing in Christ while retaining household hierarchies. Law, narrative, wisdom, and prophecy do different ethical work.

Barton accordingly treats ancient Israelite ethics as including several models: divine command, something like natural law, virtue, custom, and convention (Barton, 2014). Collins argues that the Bible seldom yields simple answers on contested moral issues and that its values require critical evaluation rather than automatic repetition (Collins, 2019). Davies surveys evolutionary, cultural-relativist, canonical, and other approaches to ethically difficult texts, exposing the methodological choices each reader brings (Davies, 2010). The strongest historical conclusion is therefore not that every later text is morally better. It is that the corpus records multiple communities and modes of ethical reasoning over time.

The human-cultural model makes this combination unsurprising: inherited authority, local adaptation, internal criticism, continuity through reuse, and uneven change. It also permits striking innovation. Berman argues that the Pentateuch reconstituted ancient institutions in unusually egalitarian ways and weakened conventional concentrations of political and economic power (Berman, 2008). Cultural production is capable of novelty; a distinctive idea is not by itself evidence of a nonhuman source. These observations do not identify the particular learning, prestige, conformity, institutional, or selection processes responsible for any given textual development.

4. A Qualitative Likelihood Comparison

Likelihood reasoning asks how expected the evidence is under competing models. It does not ask which model can be made logically compatible with the evidence. Nearly any broad historical or theological model can be protected by enough auxiliary assumptions. The useful comparison concerns relative expectation (Sober, 2008).

To keep the auxiliaries attached to the hypotheses they qualify, define two model packages: $M_H \equiv H_C \wedge A_C$ and $M_D \equiv D_S \wedge A_D$. Their likelihood ratio is

$$\Lambda(E) = \frac{\Pr(E \mid M_H)}{\Pr(E \mid M_D)}. \quad (1)$$

Here E is the four-part evidential profile already identified. A_C includes ordinary assumptions about cultural transmission, institutional interests, literary reuse, and canon formation. A_D includes genre sensitivity, covenant differentiation, human mediation, and the level of clarity claimed by the strong mandate model. Equation (1) does not assign numbers. It structures a directional judgment: if the observed profile is more expected under M_H than under M_D , then $\Lambda(E) > 1$; the argument does not establish how much greater.

Why think the direction favors M_H ? Historically situated production directly anticipates scope-bound norms, status asymmetries, editorial layering, contested reinterpretation, and dependence on later communities to extend or constrain inherited rules. The strong mandate model permits these phenomena, but it has an additional functional commitment: after accounting for genre and covenant, the central transhistorical moral guidance should remain sufficiently recoverable. Persistent ambiguity about slavery, violence, gender, wealth, punishment, and authority places directional pressure on that commitment. Without an independently specified threshold for sufficient recoverability, however, the size of the pressure remains unmeasured.

Posterior odds would also depend on prior odds:

$$\frac{\Pr(M_H \mid E)}{\Pr(M_D \mid E)} = \Lambda(E) \times \frac{\Pr(M_H)}{\Pr(M_D)}. \quad (2)$$

Equation (2) prevents an overstatement. A likelihood advantage is not a deductive disproof, and people with different prior commitments may rationally reach different posterior judgments. The odds compare only these two packages; they do not assign the residual alternatives zero probability. No claim of overwhelming evidence is warranted without defended magnitudes, dependencies, model specifications, and alternatives.

Likelihood cautions.

The four clusters may share historical and hermeneutical causes, so their likelihood contributions must not be multiplied as if independent. H_C is also broader and more flexible than a mechanism-specific cultural model; that flexibility limits the strength of the comparison. The analysis therefore claims a conditional direction for two stated packages, not a numerical Bayes factor or a complete partition of the hypothesis space.

Interpretive note. The comparison is deliberately asymmetric in scope. D_S contains a public-guidance commitment that can be tested by clarity and convergence. A thinner claim—for example, that a deity somehow acts through culturally embedded texts without guaranteeing a recoverable code—does not make the same prediction and is not refuted when D_S underperforms.

5. The Strongest Theological Replies

5.1 Accommodation and progressive revelation

On an accommodation model, the deity specified by the model communicates through the conceptual and institutional limits of an audience. Progressive revelation adds a direction: later stages disclose or realize more of the intended moral order. These models predict some cultural embedding and development, so the evidence is not automatically more likely under H_C than under every divine model.

The key question is what the expanded divine model predicts *before* disputed passages are classified. Call it D_A . To discriminate D_A from H_C , defenders need criteria specified independently of the classification at issue—not necessarily criteria independent of every theological commitment—for at least four matters:

1. the direction of development;
2. the endpoint or controlling norm;
3. the mechanism by which accommodation is recognized; and
4. the authority by which one trajectory is extended while another is limited.

Without such criteria, accommodation can become a post hoc label for whatever later readers reject, and progress can be defined by the endpoint already preferred. With criteria, the model becomes substantive and testable. Wright's paradigmatic and canonical approach and Webb's redemptive-movement proposal are important because they attempt to supply such structure rather than merely invoke development (Webb, 2001; Wright, 2011).

5.2 Constant principles beneath variable applications

A defender may identify justice, mercy, love, covenant fidelity, holiness, or concern for vulnerable persons as a stable core. Variable rules then apply the same values under different circumstances. This is possible, and the presence of recurrent values is evidence of continuity.

Yet abstract agreement is weakly discriminating unless it constrains application. Slave regulation and abolition, holy war and enemy-love, patriarchal ordering and equal standing can each be redescribed in the vocabulary of justice or love. The model gains predictive content only when it explains what the principle rules out, how conflicts among principles are resolved, and why the favored application follows without simply restating a later moral preference. Otherwise the constant core is compatible with nearly every historical trajectory and cannot distinguish divine guidance from human reinterpretation.

5.3 Covenant differentiation

Covenantal theology rightly objects that instructions to ancient Israel need not bind Gentile Christians or modern states. This blocks simplistic charges of contradiction. It also concedes that surface universality is not the relevant

standard. The test shifts to the clarity and warrant of the transition rules.

If those rules are supplied by later canonical events, ecclesial tradition, Christological reading, natural law, reason, experience, or a moral principle used to rank texts, the resulting view may be coherent. It is no longer Scripture alone functioning as a self-applying code, even if a defender regards those authorities as canonically warranted. Their contribution must be made explicit when the strong mandate model is defended.

5.4 Canonical unity and divine discourse through human speech

Sophisticated doctrines of Scripture do not treat the deity as a celestial stenographer. Wolterstorff's account of divine discourse distinguishes human textual acts from a mediated divine speech act and therefore makes room for a double hermeneutic (Wolterstorff, 1995). Canonical and theological readers likewise interpret individual passages through the shape of the whole, the identity of Christ, and the practices of a community.

These approaches answer the crude objection that cultural mediation excludes divine speech. They also increase the need for hermeneutical specification. Which human discourse mediates which divine illocution? What authorizes the canonical whole to reverse, suspend, or transform a local directive? A mediated model can survive the evidence, but the observable overlap with H_C grows as more of the explanatory work is assigned to ordinary composition, editing, reception, and communal judgment.

5.5 Divine command theory and moral grounding

Even if moral obligation is grounded in the commands or nature of the deity specified by a theory, it does not follow that every biblical directive is a transparent instance of that grounding. Adams's theistic ethical framework gives divine commands a central role while also connecting obligation with the good and the value of persons (Adams, 1999). The metaphysical claim that a deity grounds morality and the epistemic claim that a canon reliably communicates determinate divine requirements are distinct. The present argument concerns the second.

Accordingly, the human-cultural verdict does not entail moral anti-realism, and divine command theory does not by itself rescue the strong mandate model. Both sides must still explain how disputed texts are identified, interpreted, and applied.

6. Interpretive Plurality as Evidence

Disagreement alone proves little. People can resist clear evidence, read carelessly, or protect interests. Nor should convergence be expected on every peripheral matter. The relevant phenomenon is durable, informed, good-faith disagreement among communities that share the canon and claim its authority but reach incompatible judgments about central moral questions.

Disagreement as evidence.

Interpretive plurality bears on D_S only to the extent that the disputants are informed, sincere, relevantly competent, and addressing central rather than peripheral norms. The paper does not supply a numerical baseline for expected convergence. Disagreement therefore contributes modest, defeasible evidence; it is not a direct measure of textual clarity and never proves that no best reading exists.

Smith calls the evangelical form of this problem *pervasive interpretive pluralism*: biblicists who affirm scriptural clarity and authority nonetheless produce divergent teachings from the same text (Smith, 2011). The point is not that one interpretation cannot be best. It is that the route from canon to determinate moral rule depends on further judgments about genre, historical context, canonical priority, theological tradition, experience, and the relative authority of general principles and specific commands.

The continuing scholarly conversation confirms that biblical ethics is not reducible to extraction of an uncontested code. Hays's influential synthesis organized New Testament ethics through community, cross, and new creation (Hays, 1996). Three decades later, a major collection revisits that framework through competing hermeneutical, exegetical, and contemporary concerns, including sexuality, wealth, race, ecology, and the role of human experience (Hunt et al., 2026). This is not a failure of scholarship. It is evidence that ethical appropriation is a constructive practice in dialogue with changing questions.

Under H_C , such plurality is unsurprising: texts underdetermine later policy, and communities use additional values and institutions to negotiate meaning. Under D_S , an antecedent commitment to publicly recoverable central guidance creates some expectation of convergence, unless the model explains why disagreement is not diagnostic. Because no convergence threshold is quantified here, this evidence affects the direction of comparison more securely than its magnitude.

7. What the Evidence Does and Does Not Show

The argument supports four conclusions.

First, the Bible's moral diversity is not well described as a single unchanging list. Scope, covenant, genre, and historical setting matter. Any responsible defense of biblical authority already acknowledges this.

Second, for the stated model packages and selected stress tests, the human-cultural model has a conditional qualitative likelihood advantage over the strong mandate model. Status-differentiated laws, multiple ethical voices, canonical reinterpretation, and persistent hermeneutical underdetermination are less surprising under historically situated cultural production without a specially guaranteed decision rule.

Third, the advantage is comparative rather than absolute. Accommodation, progressive revelation, covenantal, canonical, and divine-discourse models can incorporate the evidence. Their credibility depends on the independent content they add: a non-circular direction of development, warranted transition rules, a specified divine speech act, or a principled account of canonical priority. A model that can absorb every outcome after the fact has less evidential force than one that risks being wrong.

Fourth, the verdict is about epistemic access to divine moral mandate, not about whether every biblical tradition lacks ethical insight. The corpus contains criticism of power, concern for the poor, constraints on rulers, visions of reconciliation, and resources for reform. Historical human production can generate profound moral insight, and a mediated theology may regard those achievements as sites of divine action. What the evidence resists is the stronger claim that the canon delivers a clear, self-applying, transhistorical code whose authority can be invoked without exposing the reader's additional moral and hermeneutical choices.

Calibrated verdict. The evidential profile favors historically situated human production over Scripture as a transparent transhistorical moral code. Broader mediated-inspiration models remain possible, but the more closely their historical expectations match ordinary cultural production, the less this evidence can distinguish them from it.

8. Conclusion

The contrast between unchanging divine mandate and cultural evolution becomes useful only after both terms are disciplined. Divine immutability does not entail identical instructions for every time and audience. Cultural evolution does not entail steady moral progress. The relevant contest is between a strong public-guidance claim and a model of historically situated composition, transmission, and reinterpretation.

Within the selected stress tests, the moral record fits the human-cultural package better. The treatment of slavery, the plurality of war ideologies, the renegotiation of covenant boundaries, and the enduring need for

extratextual hermeneutical judgment are unsurprising in a historically layered canon. A strong mandate package can accommodate them, but its auxiliaries must preserve the promised recoverability of central guidance rather than merely redescribe the evidence after the fact. The human-cultural package also remains broad: this argument does not identify a unique cultural-transmission mechanism.

Those explanations deserve serious assessment. Accommodation may be genuine; revelation may be progressive; a canon may mediate divine discourse through fallible authors; stable principles may underlie changing rules. But these proposals gain evidential value only by specifying what development should look like, which readings are authorized, what outcomes would count against the model, and how later moral judgment is distinguished from retrospective attribution to the biblical deity.

The conclusion is therefore neither a deductive refutation of divine involvement nor a celebration of every cultural change. It is a limited model-selection judgment. Across these stress tests, the Bible behaves more like a historically evolving moral archive than a transparent statement of an unchanging mandate. Readers who invoke the canon as public moral authority should therefore state openly which transition rule they use, what evidence could count against it, and how much moral work is performed by text, tradition, reason, experience, and continuing human judgment.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

Plain-language premise–conclusion sequence

- P1.** If an observed evidence profile is more expected under one adequately specified model than under a comparator, that profile gives defeasible evidential support to the first model over the comparator.
- P2.** The strong divine-mandate model predicts that, despite genre, covenant, and human mediation, the canon will make its central moral requirements and transition rules sufficiently recoverable for its claimed transhistorical public-guidance function.
- P3.** The human-cultural model predicts locally scoped rules, inherited and competing moral voices, revision and reuse, and reliance on later communities without a specially guaranteed decision procedure.
- P4.** The selected record—status-differentiated laws, plural war traditions, changing covenant markers, and durable informed disagreement—fits the expectation in P3 better than the expectation in P2.
- C.** Therefore, within these selected domains, the record gives defeasible evidential support to the human-cultural model over the strong divine-mandate model. It does not deductively exclude accommodation, progressive revelation, or other mediated-divine alternatives that supply independent predictive content.

Validity of the inference

The final move from P1 and P4 to C is deductively valid once P4's comparative judgment is granted: a profile that is more expected under one model favors that model in the stated contrast. The argument is not a deductive disproof of the strong mandate model, because P4 does not say that the observed profile is logically impossible under it. Nor does the conclusion range over every possible divine model.

Support for the premises

P1 states the likelihood principle. P2 and P3 summarize the models' contrasting commitments. P4 is the inductive premise: the stress tests and cited scholarship support its direction, but no numerical likelihood ratio or representative sample establishes its magnitude. The conclusion remains comparative, domain-limited, and revisable if a mediated-divine alternative fits the record better.

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