

Reading Atrocity Responsibly

Descriptive Texts, Prescriptive Claims, and the Discipline of Moral-Hermeneutical Classification

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Central claim

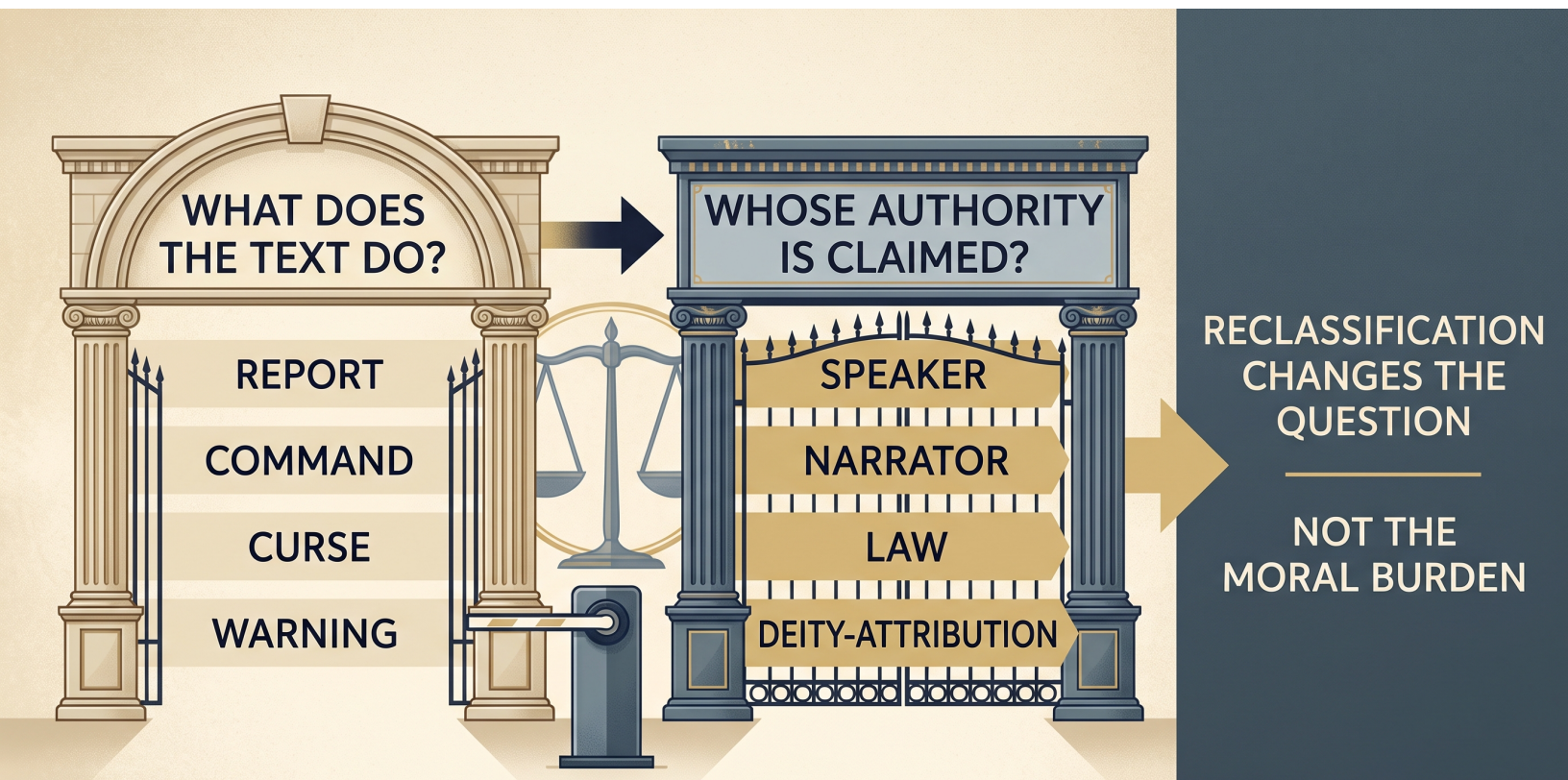
Responsible moral judgment of a violent biblical passage requires two distinct findings: what textual act the passage performs and what authority it portrays as endorsing, requiring, condemning, or merely voicing the violence. Reclassification transfers the burden to the right question; it does not discharge that burden. The same criteria must govern protected and rival traditions.

Preview:

Textual act	Attributed authority	Burden transferred	What does not follow
Report, command, curse, warning, prayer, or law.	Speaker, narrator, legal code, canonical voice, or the Christian deity under examination.	Explain normalization, permission, obligation, judgment, or moral formation.	Neither condemnation nor acquittal follows from genre alone.

The method is deliberately symmetrical: a skeptic may not turn every violent image into a command, and a Christian defender may not turn an explicit command into scenery merely by invoking ancient rhetoric.

Visual preview:



SAME STANDARDS FOR PROTECTED AND RIVAL TEXTS

The two gates separate textual act from portrayed authority. Passing through them redirects the moral question without removing its burden; the bottom rule applies the same classifications to protected and rival texts.

Abstract

Debates over biblical atrocity passages often go wrong before explicit moral reasoning begins. A critic can treat a narrated atrocity, lament, or judgment oracle as though it instructs an audience to commit violence. A Christian defender can make the mirror error, treating an explicit destruction command as mere narrative scenery, generic war rhetoric, or a morally inert report. Both moves misidentify the object of evaluation.

This paper replaces a simple descriptive–prescriptive division with a two-gate audit. The textual-act gate identifies what a passage is doing: reporting, commanding, legislating, cursing, warning, praising, or praying. The normative-attribution gate asks what authority the text portrays as attached to that act: private desire, human policy, narrator approval, legal requirement, prophetic announcement, or authorization attributed to the Christian deity. Four layers—violent content, speech act, portrayed stance, and later appropriation—prevent genre labels from doing work they cannot do.

Worked analyses of Psalm 137:9, Isaiah 13:16, Deuteronomy 20:16–18, 1 Samuel 15:3, and Numbers 31 show that reclassification transfers rather than removes the moral burden. A curse is not a statute, but sacred speech may still shape moral imagination. A judgment oracle is not a human order, but it may attribute catastrophe to divine agency. Ancient conquest hyperbole may restrict the extent of a command without changing its prescriptive force. The result is a bounded methodological thesis: classification does not establish whether an atrocity occurred or was justified. It identifies the claim that must be defended and prevents either side from obtaining a moral verdict by changing categories.

Keywords: biblical violence; speech acts; moral hermeneutics; *herem*; conquest rhetoric; divine command; classification

1 The Dispute before the Dispute

Atrocity passages create an unusual pressure on interpretation. The events described or demanded are morally grave: children killed, cities destroyed, captives taken, sexual violence announced, and whole populations marked for destruction. Because the material is charged, each side has an incentive to settle the moral verdict while presenting the text. A skeptic may quote a horrific sentence as if its presence establishes biblical approval. A Christian defender may invoke genre or historical convention as if classification establishes moral innocence.

These shortcuts are mirror images. The skeptic’s characteristic error is *overextension*: violent content in a report, curse, or oracle is promoted into a general command. The defender’s characteristic error is *underclassification*: a legal or narrated command is demoted into description, rhetorical color, or background. Either move makes the debate easier by changing its object.

The needed discipline can be stated simply: identify what the text does and what authority it claims before deciding what moral conclusion follows. The first task is partly linguistic. Utterances do things: they report, order, promise, warn, curse, authorize, and pray. Speech-act theory supplies useful terms for this ordinary fact (Austin 1975; Searle 1969). The second task is literary and normative. A command voiced by a villain, a policy announced by a king, a law attributed to Moses, and a prophetic declaration attributed to the Christian deity do not have the same portrayed authority merely because each uses imperative or violent language.

The thesis is methodological, not exculpatory. Classification can narrow a criticism, redirect it, or intensify it. It cannot by itself show that a passage is historically accurate, divinely authorized, morally justified, or safe in later use. Scholarship on war ideologies, conquest rhetoric, portrayals of violence, and ancient personhood supplies indispensable context, but context is evidence for a more precise judgment rather than a substitute for judgment (Niditch 1993; Younger 1990; Lemos 2017; Lynch 2020).

Morally critical studies likewise show why interpretive precision should sharpen rather than suppress questions about scriptural violence and its portrayal of divine agency (Collins 2004; Seibert 2009).

The Burden-Transfer Principle

When evidence supports a new classification, the interpreter must transfer the moral burden to the question appropriate to that classification. A report raises questions about portrayal, approval, normalization, and reception; a command raises questions about authority, scope, protected persons, and justification. Reclassification is not itself a moral acquittal.

This principle is the paper’s central refinement. “It is poetry” and “it is hyperbole” are incomplete replies until they specify what moral inference the classification blocks, what speech act remains, and what burden replaces the blocked inference. Likewise, “the Bible contains this sentence” is incomplete criticism until the critic identifies who speaks, what the utterance does, and how the work presents it.

2 Four Layers, Two Gates

A genre label is too coarse to settle the relevant classification. Narratives contain commands; poems contain reports and curses; laws contain historical prologues; prophetic books contain laments, warnings, symbolic actions, and attributed divine speech. The following four layers prevent an interpreter from sliding among distinct questions.

Layer	Question	Why it matters
Content	What violence is represented?	Establishes the act, victim, agent, scale, and conditions at issue without yet deciding endorsement.
Textual act	What is the utterance doing?	Distinguishes report, command, threat, law, curse, prayer, praise, and warning.
Portrayed stance	What authority or evaluation does the work attach?	Separates a character’s desire from narrator approval, legal obligation, or action attributed to the Christian deity.
Appropriation	How is the passage used by later readers or institutions?	A non-command can still normalize violence; an ancient command can be universalized, limited, rejected, or typologized.

Table 1: Four layers that should not be collapsed into a single genre label.

The *textual-act gate* combines the first two layers. It asks what linguistic act is performed with the violent content. Grammar is evidence, but not the only evidence. Speaker, addressee, convention, narrative setting, and literary function all matter. “They destroyed the city” ordinarily reports; “destroy the city” ordinarily directs. Yet a quotation of either sentence may be condemned by the surrounding narrator, and a prayer can grammatically use an imperative without functioning as legislation for the congregation.

The *normative-attribution gate* combines portrayed stance and the relevant aspects of appropriation. It asks who is represented as authorizing, endorsing, condemning, permitting, or simply voicing the act. The answer may be layered. A narrator can report that a human commander attributed an order to the Christian deity without the historical claim or moral authority of that attribution being established merely by narration. Conversely, a defender who accepts scriptural inerrancy may regard such attribution as authoritative and therefore inherit a stronger justificatory burden than a reader who treats it as an ancient human claim.

Argumentation theory explains why the gates matter. Evidence supports a conclusion only through a warrant—a rule connecting the evidence to the claim (Toulmin 1958; Walton et al. 2008). “This canon depicts atrocity” does not alone warrant “this canon commands its readers to commit atrocity.” Nor does “this is ancient conquest rhetoric” alone warrant “no morally objectionable prescription remains.” Each transition needs a defensible bridge.

3 What Each Classification Transfers

Once the two gates are passed, the interpreter should name the burden that remains. Table 2 is a transfer ledger, not a ranking of moral seriousness.

Classification	Inference blocked	Burden that remains
Narrative report	The event is not thereby a command or approval.	Explain narrator stance, causal framing, selective sympathy, normalization, and canonical placement.
Human command	The order is not thereby attributed to the Christian deity or endorsed by the work.	Identify the commander’s authority and the narrative evaluation of compliance or refusal.
Attributed divine command	It is not thereby timeless or universal.	Defend original authority, target, proportionality, protected persons, evidential access, and any limit on scope.
Judgment oracle	The audience is not necessarily instructed to perform the announced violence.	Address the attribution of agency, proportionality of judgment, rhetoric, and suffering of noncombatants.
Imprecatory prayer	A wish or petition is not a statute.	Address moral formation, canonical authorization of the speech, trauma, and any later liturgical use.
Conquest hyperbole	Maximum literal extent may be overstated.	Show which clauses are conventional, what conduct remains commanded, and whether the remaining targets are morally protected.

Table 2: Reclassification blocks one inference and identifies the next moral burden.

Three consequences follow. First, description is not moral neutrality. A narrative can invite admiration, make victims invisible, attribute success to divine favor, or embed violence within a desirable identity. Studies of violent portrayal rightly attend to these literary and cultural effects rather than asking only whether an imperative appears (Lynch 2020; Lemos 2017).

Second, prescription is not universality. An order can be restricted to an agent, place, occasion, covenant, or legal jurisdiction. Scope restrictions matter, but they answer “who must do this and when?” rather than “was the prescribed act morally justified?” A one-time command to kill a protected person does not become morally slight merely because it is not standing policy.

Third, attributed divine agency is not reducible to human instruction. A prophecy can present catastrophe as judgment without telling the audience to cause it. That blocks a charge of direct human incitement. It does not settle the theological question raised when the text portrays the Christian deity as intending, permitting, or deploying that catastrophe.

4 Five Test Cases

The method becomes clearer when applied to passages often grouped under the single label “biblical atrocity.” The readings below are not full exegetical treatments. They identify the textual act, portrayed authority, and proper moral question.

4.1 Psalm 137:9: blessing, curse, and traumatic voice

Psalm 137 ends by calling happy the one who seizes Babylonian infants and dashes them against rock. The line is not a penal statute and does not grammatically command Israelite readers to kill infants. It belongs to an imprecatory poem voiced from exile and directed against Babylon. Reclassifying it as traumatized curse or petition therefore blocks the claim that the line itself legislates infant killing.

The moral inquiry does not end. The poem pronounces blessing over retaliatory violence against children, and canonical inclusion can authorize the speech as language available to a worshipping community. Relevant questions concern whether the poem expresses rage without endorsing action, exposes rather than idealizes the psychic cost of imperial violence, invokes proportional judgment, or shapes a morally dangerous imagination. Classification makes those questions visible; calling the line “only poetry” does not answer them.

4.2 Isaiah 13:16: announcement without human instruction

Isaiah 13 announces the fall of Babylon with infants dashed, houses plundered, and women violated. The passage functions as a judgment oracle, not an instruction addressed to Judah to perform these acts. A critic should therefore not cite it as a standing human command.

Yet the oracle portrays the catastrophe within a declared divine judgment. The transferred burden concerns attributed agency, proportionality, rhetorical intensification, and the use of sexual violence and harm to children within judgment speech. Even if invading forces are the immediate human agents, the theology of the oracle links their devastation to the Christian deity’s announced purpose. “Not a human command” is an important clarification, not a complete theodicy.

4.3 Deuteronomy 20:16–18: law, scope, and protected targets

Deuteronomy 20 distinguishes distant cities from the towns of specified peoples in the promised land. For the latter, it directs Israel to leave alive nothing that breathes and gives a rationale concerning idolatrous instruction. This is legal-prescriptive material within a covenantal war setting. It is not a report that violence happened despite the law.

The command is geographically and historically bounded; nothing in its immediate form licenses later Christians to repeat it. That limit matters for contemporary application. It does not remove the original moral question. The burden concerns whether the attributed authority could justly prescribe the killing of all persons within the target category, how the target language functions, whether noncombatants are included, and what independent evidence supports the attribution. The ritual category *herem* explains how destruction is framed as devotion or removal from ordinary use; it also makes the violence theologically structured rather than accidental (Niditch 1993).

4.4 1 Samuel 15:3: command plus narrative enforcement

In 1 Samuel 15, Samuel orders Saul to strike Amalek and specifies men, women, children, infants, and livestock. The narrative subsequently treats Saul’s failure to carry out the destruction fully as disobedience. Whatever historical and compositional questions surround the chapter, its literary presentation is not morally neutral reportage. A command is attributed to the Christian deity through the prophetic speaker, and the narrative evaluates incomplete compliance negatively.

Ancient conquest idiom may bear on the extent or conventional force of totalizing expressions (Younger 1990). It does not automatically convert the order into description. Nor does it by itself remove infants from the expressly named target class. The defender must identify the exact phrase treated as hyperbolic, offer evidence for that reading, and state the residual command. Commentarial attention to the chapter’s rhetoric and narrative purpose is useful at this stage, but it cannot replace moral analysis (Tsumura 2007).

4.5 Numbers 31: layered commands in narrative

Numbers 31 narrates war against Midian, the killing of adult males, Moses' anger that women were spared, and his directive to kill male children and non-virgin women while preserving virgin girls. The book's genre is narrative, but the relevant sentences include human commands within that narrative. The label "narrative" therefore does not settle the speech act.

The normative-attribution question is more layered than in a simple legal formula. The chapter introduces the campaign as divinely directed, narrates Moses' subsequent order, and embeds the outcome in ritual purification and distribution rules. An interpreter must distinguish what the text explicitly attributes to the Christian deity, what Moses adds or administers, and how the narrator frames him. Even if one resists a direct divine-command classification for every detail, the moral burden persists at the level of portrayed leadership, canonical stance, treatment of captives, and ritual integration of the violence.

Passage	Textual act	Portrayed authority	Primary moral burden
Psalm 137:9	Imprecatory blessing or curse	Traumatized poetic speaker within canonical prayer	Moral formation and authorization of retaliatory speech
Isaiah 13:16	Prophetic announcement	Catastrophe portrayed as divine judgment through human invaders	Agency, proportionality, and judgment rhetoric
Deut. 20:16–18	Covenant law or command	Prescribed warfare attributed to the Christian deity	Authority, scope, protected persons, and justification
1 Sam. 15:3	Prophetic command in narrative	Divine command attributed through Samuel and reinforced by plot	Residual prescription after any hyperbolic restriction
Numbers 31	War report with human directives	Divinely initiated campaign, Mosaic orders, ritual framing	Layered attribution, captives, narrator stance, and authority

Table 3: A compact classification and burden ledger for five disputed passages.

5 Hyperbole Changes Extent, Not Automatically Force

Comparative study of ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts shows recurring totalizing formulas and literary conventions. Such evidence can challenge a flatly literal reconstruction in which every claimed annihilation occurred exactly as stated (Younger 1990). It can also illuminate why a text later depicts survivors after language of total destruction. Those are important historical and semantic gains.

The apologetic use of hyperbole often makes an additional move: because the extent may be overstated, the moral problem is treated as dissolved. That inference does not follow. At least four variables must be kept separate:

- **Force:** Was an utterance a command, report, boast, curse, or warning?
- **Extent:** How comprehensively was the violent action said or intended to apply?
- **Target:** Which persons or objects remained within the non-hyperbolic content?
- **Occurrence:** What, if anything, happened historically?

A command can use exaggerated scope while remaining a command. "Destroy them all" might conventionally mean decisive defeat rather than literal extermination, but the revised interpretation still needs a proposition: kill all combatants, destroy political centers, expel the population, or something else. The moral evaluation attaches to that remainder. If a passage expressly names children or infants,

a generic appeal to battlefield rhetoric is especially incomplete unless it explains why those terms are conventional, nonreferential, or otherwise outside the residual prescription.

The same restraint applies to critics. A critic should not infer a historically completed genocide solely from boastful or totalizing narration. The moral claim may instead concern an endorsed ideal, an attributed command, a portrayed intention, or the formative use of exterminatory language. That narrower target may still be serious. Accurate criticism does not need the largest available claim.

The Residual-Content Test

After any appeal to genre, idiom, hyperbole, or historical convention, state the smallest violent proposition that the interpretation still attributes to the passage. Moral evaluation begins with that remainder. If no remainder is stated, the appeal has not yet answered the objection; it has only renamed the interpretive problem.

This test clarifies the disagreement between morally critical and apologetic treatments of conquest. Defenses may combine limited scope, judicial authority, cultural context, and the claim that the Christian deity has prerogatives unavailable to humans (Copan and Flannagan 2014). Critics may argue that even a bounded command attributed to a perfectly good deity is *prima facie* evidence against inerrancy or against the attribution itself (Morrison 2009; Rauser 2009). Classification cannot choose between those conclusions. It can require both sides to argue about the same residual content.

6 Symmetry and the Source-Switch Test

Hermeneutical care becomes unreliable when it appears only for a protected text. A Christian reader may interpret hostile religious or political writings at face value while surrounding a biblical command with contextual qualifications. A skeptic may insist on genre sensitivity for secular war epics or traumatized poetry while treating every biblical violent image as direct policy. Both patterns substitute allegiance for method.

The remedy is a source-switch test. Hold the wording, genre, speaker relation, claimed authority, target, and historical setting as constant; change only the tradition whose canon contains the passage. If the classification or initial moral verdict reverses, the interpreter should identify the unequal evidence that explains the reversal. Prior trust can rationally affect the probability assigned to an attribution, but it does not change a report into a command or a command into a report.

This distinction matters in divine-command disputes. A defender may argue that the character of the Christian deity guarantees the goodness of an authenticated command. The philosophical tradition associated with modified divine-command theory ties obligation to commands issued by a loving or essentially good deity rather than to arbitrary will (Adams 1999). Yet in a disputed atrocity case, the goodness of the source and the authenticity of the command are among the matters under examination. If apparent moral atrocity is neutralized by presumed goodness, and goodness is then confirmed by denying that the source could command atrocity, the evaluation becomes circular.

A symmetric audit therefore asks two questions separately. What does the text attribute? What independent reasons support accepting that attribution as a command of a perfectly good deity? One may answer the second question affirmatively, negatively, or agnostically. The key is not to let a favorable answer be built into the classification vocabulary.

Symmetry does not require treating all sources as equally credible. It requires using equal standards for equal evidence and making any evidential asymmetry explicit. Nor does it require ignoring cultural difference. Historical setting can change the meaning, available alternatives, agency, and expectations of a text. But “ancient” is not itself a moral exemption, just as “modern” is not proof of moral superiority.

7 Objections and Replies

7.1 The method is obvious

The distinction between report and command is elementary. Its repeated violation is precisely why it needs an explicit procedure. More importantly, the two-gate account is not exhausted by grammar. It distinguishes a passage's speech act from its portrayed authority and later appropriation. Many hard cases arise after everyone agrees that a sentence is not a direct command to the reader.

7.2 Classification postpones moral judgment indefinitely

Classification can be abused as delay. The burden-transfer and residual-content tests prevent that abuse. The interpreter must state what inference is blocked, what proposition remains, and what moral question follows. If genre vocabulary is used without a residual claim, the classification is incomplete.

7.3 Canonical context settles the normative attribution

For a confessional reader, canonical context may support strong claims about authority. It still does not erase internal speakers, narrative distance, development, or conflicting portrayals. For a non-confessional reader, canonical status is evidence about a community's reception rather than proof of divine authorization. The method allows either standpoint but requires it to be declared rather than smuggled into the speech-act label.

7.4 Modern moral categories are anachronistic

Historical study is essential for understanding war, personhood, social identity, ritual devotion, and rhetoric in ancient Israel (Niditch 1993; Lemos 2017). Understanding why a practice made sense within an ancient world differs from deciding whether the practice was justified or whether a perfectly good deity could authorize it. Context may alter the act under review and the agents' culpability; it does not make evaluation unintelligible.

7.5 A perfectly good deity has moral authority unavailable to creatures

Differences between divine and human agency may be morally relevant. The claim nevertheless requires specification. Authority to end life, perfect knowledge, judicial status, creator rights, or compensation address different objections and have different limits. None follows from the classification "divine command" alone. In addition, the human recipient must have adequate grounds for believing that the command is authentic; otherwise a theory of divine authority can become a license for human misattribution. The classificatory audit identifies this epistemic burden without assuming its outcome.

7.6 The method unfairly focuses on Christianity

The examples are Christian because the dispute under examination concerns texts received as Christian scripture and claims about the Christian deity. The method is portable. The same four layers, two gates, source-switch test, and residual-content test apply to Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, secular revolutionary, nationalist, or other authoritative corpora. Symmetry is a feature of the method, not a claim that all traditions contain identical material.

8 A Portable Protocol for Responsible Debate

The analysis can be condensed into a practical sequence.

1. **Quote enough context.** Identify speaker, addressee, grammatical form, literary unit, and narrative setting.

2. **Name the violent content.** Specify agent, act, target, scale, and any stated rationale without yet inferring approval.
3. **Pass the textual-act gate.** Classify the relevant utterance as report, command, law, warning, curse, prayer, praise, or another act. Do not use the book's broad genre as a substitute.
4. **Pass the normative-attribution gate.** State whose desire, policy, judgment, or authority is portrayed and what stance the narrator or canon appears to take.
5. **Apply the residual-content test.** After any appeal to idiom, hyperbole, symbolism, or historical uncertainty, write the smallest remaining violent proposition.
6. **Transfer the burden.** Name the moral question appropriate to that proposition: authority, proportionality, protected persons, normalization, judgment, formation, or later use.
7. **Run the source-switch test.** Ask whether the same evidence would receive the same classification and initial moral scrutiny in a rival or unfamiliar tradition.
8. **Bound the conclusion.** Say whether the evidence supports a claim about textual portrayal, original prescription, historical occurrence, divine authorization, or contemporary application. Do not slide among them.

The protocol does not promise consensus. A Christian defender may conclude that a bounded conquest command was justly issued; a critic may conclude that the attribution counts against inerrancy or perfect divine goodness; a historian may suspend both judgments while reconstructing ancient rhetoric. The gain is that they disagree about an explicitly stated proposition and carry the burden appropriate to it.

This precision strengthens criticism. Psalm 137 need not be misrepresented as criminal law for its moral formation to be questioned. Isaiah 13 need not instruct its audience to assault civilians for its theology of judgment to be challenged. It also strengthens defense. A defender need not answer an allegation of timeless instruction when the text presents a local oracle or one-time command. What precision forbids is obtaining an acquittal or conviction by changing the kind of claim midway.

9 Conclusion

Responsible reading of atrocity passages begins with classification but cannot end there. Reports are not commands. Commands are not mere reports. A curse is not a statute. A prophecy is not automatically a human instruction. Yet reports portray, curses form imagination, prophecies attribute agency, and commands retain moral weight even when their scope is historically restricted.

The two-gate audit clarifies both dimensions. The textual-act gate asks what the passage does. The normative-attribution gate asks what authority or stance the work assigns to that act. The burden-transfer principle then prevents genre from becoming an escape hatch, while the residual-content test prevents hyperbole from erasing whatever prescription remains. The source-switch test disciplines allegiance on both sides.

The conclusion is intentionally bounded. Classification alone does not prove that narrated violence occurred, that an attributed command came from a perfectly good deity, that a passage is morally defensible, or that it authorizes later action. It determines what must be argued next. Skeptics should stop overclaiming from the wrong texts. Christian defenders should stop underclaiming from the hard ones. Moral seriousness begins when both sides face the same proposition under the same standards.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The central argument can be stated without assuming either biblical inerrancy or the falsity of theistic claims.

1. A responsible moral verdict must target a proposition that the evidence supports.
2. Violent content alone does not establish whether a passage reports, commands, curses, warns, praises, or prays for violence.
3. A passage's speech act alone does not establish whose authority or approval the work assigns to the violence.
4. Therefore, responsible evaluation of a violent passage requires both a textual-act classification and a normative-attribution classification.
5. Reclassifying a passage blocks only the inferences incompatible with the new classification; it does not settle the moral questions compatible with it.
6. Therefore, reclassification transfers the moral burden to the question appropriate to the residual content rather than discharging that burden.
7. A classification rule is methodologically reliable only if relevantly similar evidence would receive the same classification across protected and rival traditions.
8. Therefore, responsible moral-hermeneutical classification requires a two-gate audit, an explicit burden transfer, a stated residual proposition, and symmetric application.

The argument yields a procedural conclusion. It does not entail a verdict about the historical occurrence or moral justification of any individual passage. Its practical force is diagnostic: where an interpretation omits a gate, fails to state the residual content, or changes standards with the source, the resulting moral inference is not yet adequately supported.

Validity and scope

Premises 1–3 support the need for the two gates. Premises 5–6 supply the burden-transfer rule. Premises 7–8 add the symmetry condition. A critic can reject the result only by denying that moral verdicts should track supported propositions, showing that violent content fixes speech act and authority without contextual evidence, arguing that reclassification itself settles every compatible moral question, or defending source-relative standards. Each route carries a visible methodological cost.

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