

Rights Against Power

Biblical Authority, Universal Protection, and the Failure of Exclusive Theological Grounding

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Central claim

The claim that universal human rights require exclusive biblical grounding conflates authorship, justification, genealogy, and enforcement. Universality means equal human possession, not exceptionlessness or automatic application to every possible agent; bare authority still leaves a right's content, scope, exceptions, and duty-bearers undetermined. The canon requires additional moral and interpretive bridges, while the history of modern rights is plural. A developed Christian theory remains live, but the monopoly claim is not established.

Preview: The ownership claim under pressure

The claim

Only biblical authority can make rights universal.



Three tests

Define the domain, compare the whole canon, and trace the actual genealogy.



Bounded result

Authority underdetermines rights; the canon needs bridges; sole ownership fails.

The conclusion is deliberately bounded: it rejects a monopoly claim, not every Christian motivation, genealogy, or metaphysical account of rights.

Visual preview:



The balance stages a canonical tension between equal human status and claimed permissions or commands. It neither assumes that every justified exception destroys a right nor represents the paper's separate historical argument.

Abstract

A familiar apologetic argument says that governments cannot ground human rights because governments can withdraw them, whereas an unchanging biblical deity can make rights universal and permanent. The argument compresses four questions: what a right is, what justifies it, how it developed, and what enforces it. It also confuses universality, which concerns who possesses a right, with absoluteness, which concerns whether any limitation is justified. Once those distinctions are made, bare authorship proves too little: a command-giver can impose duties, but authority alone does not determine which people hold claims, which agents owe the corresponding duties, or what exceptions preserve equal status.

The biblical canon also yields a mixed rather than self-sufficient modern rights doctrine. Creation, covenant, concern for strangers, prophetic criticism, and Christian equality formulas can support human dignity. Yet slavery, coercive worship, unequal family and civic standing, conquest, and narrated destruction require substantive moral and interpretive restrictions. Historically, modern rights arose through interacting biblical, Christian, classical, legal, Enlightenment, revolutionary, abolitionist, feminist, anti-colonial, non-Christian, and postwar sources. These canonical and historical findings establish different conclusions: the first challenges derivation from scripture alone; the second challenges sole genealogy, not the truth of a Christian moral theory. None of the three arguments disproves theism, moral realism, or a developed Christian rights theory. Together they show that exclusive biblical ownership and bare-authority grounding remain undefended.

Keywords: human rights; biblical authority; divine command theory; *imago Dei*; rights genealogy; Universal Declaration of Human Rights; religious liberty; slavery

1 The Claim Is Stronger Than It First Appears

A common argument begins with an apparently practical observation: governments can take rights away. It then offers a theological solution. If rights come from a perfect and unchanging deity, they are said to be universal, objective, and safe from political repeal. The conclusion often carries a historical addendum: secular societies did not invent rights but inherited them, whether they admit it or not, from the Bible or Christianity.

This argument appeals because it joins three real anxieties. Written law is fragile. Powerful institutions do violate the protections they proclaim. And a merely fashionable commitment seems too weak to stand against a tyrant. The wish for a foundation deeper than political convenience is therefore reasonable. But a serious answer must show more than that an ultimate authority could issue commands. It must explain what a right is, why persons have it, how it constrains those with power, how humans know its content, and what follows when the alleged source appears to authorize exceptions.

This paper examines a specific Christian *God-concept*: a specified conception of a deity as the perfectly good, unchanging, authoritative creator represented through the Christian Bible. The target is not theism in general, nor the bare possibility that a Christian philosophical system can contain rights. The target is the stronger claim that universal human rights require this biblical source, and that non-theistic accounts can offer only revocable government permissions.

The governing thesis is direct. Bare divine authorship does not produce a complete theory of rights, the biblical canon does not by itself yield a uniform modern rights code, and the history of rights is too plural to support exclusive ownership. Christian sources have contributed substantially. They are contributors within a contested inheritance, not a deed establishing sole title.

Three comparisons drive the conclusion. The *conceptual comparison* asks what bare authority explains and what must be supplied by the content of particular commands or by a wider account of worth and value. The *canonical comparison* sets rights-supporting biblical materials beside counter-materials rather

than selecting one stream. The *historical comparison* asks whether modern human-rights practice is better explained by one scriptural source or by interaction among religious, philosophical, political, and institutional traditions. Each comparison blocks a different shortcut, and none substitutes for the others.

2 Four Questions Hidden Inside the Word “Source”

The statement “rights come from the biblical deity” can answer at least four questions, and success at one does not guarantee success at the others.

Table 1: Four source questions that must not be collapsed into one.

Question	What it asks	What would answer it
Concept	What kind of relation is a right?	An account of claims, liberties, powers, immunities, and the duties correlated with them
Justification	Why should this interest, status, or choice generate a duty?	A moral argument connecting persons to protections owed by others and institutions
Genealogy	Through what histories did present rights language and practice develop?	Textual and institutional history, including borrowing, conflict, reinterpretation, and exclusion
Enforcement	What makes a protection reliable in practice?	Courts, norms, incentives, public accountability, and institutions able to resist violations

An analogy helps. Asking who “made” a bridge might mean who designed it, who supplied the steel, who paid for it, who authorized it, or what physical laws keep it standing. Naming the mayor answers only one possible question. Likewise, naming a divine legislator does not automatically explain the logical structure of rights, their moral basis, their historical development, and their practical security.

The resulting exclusivity claims must also be kept separate. *Historical priority* says one tradition originated the practice. *Normative necessity* says no rival moral justification can succeed. *Canonical sufficiency* says scripture can yield the relevant rights without indispensable added premises. *Institutional security* says a foundation can reliably restrain officials in practice. Evidence against one claim does not automatically decide the others. A mixed genealogy, for example, defeats sole historical ownership; it does not by itself show that a Christian justification is false.

The government objection trades on this ambiguity. A government can repeal a statute, ignore a treaty, or imprison a peaceful dissident. From this it does not follow that the dissident had no moral claim against arbitrary detention; it may show that the state violated one. The distinction between *existence* and *compliance* is precisely what allows rights language to criticize governments. If “a right exists” meant only “the current government will honor it,” the idea of a governmental rights violation would become incoherent.

The opposite confusion is also possible. Calling something a moral right does not make it enforceable. Eleanor Roosevelt worried that a declaration without institutions might remain a pious hope, and modern human-rights law continues to distinguish aspirational norms from reliable remedies (Morsink 1999). Moral validity and practical protection matter, but they are different achievements.

3 What a Right Against Power Must Do

Rights discourse is not philosophically uniform. Hohfeld's influential analysis distinguishes claims, liberties, powers, and immunities rather than treating "a right" as one simple object (Hohfeld 1913). If Alia has a claim-right that Ben not strike her, Ben has a corresponding duty. If Alia has a liberty to speak, she lacks a duty not to speak. If an official lacks the power to cancel her legal status, she has an immunity against that change.

Later theories disagree about why such positions count as rights. Will theories emphasize the holder's control over duties owed to that person. Interest theories emphasize interests important enough to impose duties on others. Hart's account of a general right to freedom and Raz's account of protected interests offer prominent non-theological routes (Hart 1955; Raz 1986). The disagreement matters here because a right need not be imagined as a mysterious object floating outside minds. It may be a justified normative relation: one person's interest, choice, or status gives others reasons and duties.

Human rights add a demanding scope. They are claims persons possess in virtue of being human, not because they belong to the favored tribe, hold office, have purchased membership, or obey a ruler. Their precise list remains disputed, but the modern practice centrally includes equal status, bodily security, freedom of conscience, political participation, and basic conditions for agency. The Universal Declaration announces equal dignity and rights while presenting itself as a common standard for all peoples and nations (United Nations General Assembly 1948b).

Four dimensions of scope are easily confused. *Universal possession* means that every human has the relevant status. *Duty-bearing scope* identifies the agents—individuals, governments, churches, or perhaps the deity—who owe the corresponding duty. *Absoluteness* means that no competing reason ever justifies limiting the right. *Endurance* means that violation, denial, or repeal does not erase the underlying moral claim. These dimensions can separate. Everyone may possess a right to freedom of movement although a temporary quarantine can be justified during a dangerous outbreak. A convicted attacker may be imprisoned after evidence and due process although detention based only on ethnicity remains arbitrary. Universality therefore does not entail exceptionlessness, and a justified limitation does not turn every right into a permission.

No single metaphysical theory follows from this practice. Griffin grounds human rights in normative agency or personhood, Beitz treats international human rights as a practical doctrine governing matters of international concern, and Buchanan defends a plural justification for a system of international legal rights (Griffin 2008; Beitz 2009; Buchanan 2013). These accounts can be criticized. Their existence is nevertheless enough to defeat the claim that the only alternatives are biblical command or governmental whim.

The crucial feature for this paper is *authority constraint within the claimed domain*. A political right must supply a standard under which human officials can be wrong. Consider a landlord who promises tenants that they may remain only as long as the landlord permits. That is not security of tenure against the landlord; it restates the landlord's discretion. By contrast, a lease enforced by a court can bind the owner who signed it. The fact that people constructed the legal arrangement does not prevent it from constraining some of its makers.

This yields an authority-constraint test:

Authority-constraint test. An alleged right against power is not explained merely by showing that some authority granted a permission. The account must identify its bearers, its duty-bearers, and a stable reason, status, interest, or rule under which the claim continues when a power-holder within that domain prefers to override it.

The test does not assume secularism or assume that the deity must be one more duty-bearer among humans. A theist may say that a necessarily loving divine nature supplies the stable standard. A natural-law theorist may appeal to basic human goods. A contractualist may appeal to principles no person could reasonably reject. An interest theorist may appeal to urgent human interests. The point is that each view adds a bridge from some feature of persons or value to a directed duty. “The ultimate authority commanded it” does not state that bridge.

4 The Strongest Christian Case

A fair audit must begin with the best Christian account, not a caricature of arbitrary decrees. At least five strands can support a serious theological rights theory.

First, Genesis depicts humanity as bearing the divine image, and Genesis 9:6 links that status to a prohibition on killing. Some theologians interpret *imago Dei* substantively, relationally, functionally, vocationally, or in a combination of these ways. Clines emphasizes humanity’s representative function, while Middleton develops a royal-vocational reading that extends the image across humanity (Clines 1968; Middleton 2005). Whatever interpretation is chosen, the phrase can function as a powerful declaration that ordinary persons possess a status not granted by kings.

Second, biblical law can be read comparatively. Berman argues that the Pentateuch broke with surrounding political hierarchies by elevating common Israelites, limiting centralized power, and distributing covenantal standing more broadly than ancient royal systems did (Berman 2008). Commands concerning resident aliens, widows, orphans, debt, gleaning, and judicial impartiality can train readers to see vulnerable persons as legitimate claimants rather than disposable dependents.

Third, prophetic criticism places rulers and elites under judgment. Nathan confronts David; Amos condemns those who crush the poor; Isaiah attacks rulers who deny justice; and the Christian gospels repeatedly center outsiders. Galatians 3:28 offers an equality formula that relativizes ethnic, legal-status, and gender divisions within the community. These materials are not a modern bill of rights, but they can motivate resistance to domination.

Fourth, sophisticated divine-command theory is not the claim that raw power makes cruelty good. Adams distinguishes the good from obligation and anchors divine commands in the character of a loving deity (Adams 1999). Wolterstorff argues that the worth bestowed through divine love can ground natural human rights (Wolterstorff 2008). On such views, the command-giver is not imagined as a changeable despot. Necessary goodness, love, and the worth of persons constrain which commands are genuine.

Fifth, Christian natural-law theories need not derive rights from discrete commands at all. They can argue from created human goods and practical reason to duties that bind rulers as well as subjects. Porter’s reconstruction of the Christian natural-law tradition makes revelation, reason, nature, and moral development mutually relevant rather than reducing morality to decrees (Porter 1999). This route is important because it shows that a Christian theory may answer the authority problem by adding a substantive account of human flourishing.

History strengthens the case for contribution. Tierney locates natural-rights language in medieval canon law well before the Enlightenment (Tierney 1997). Waldron argues that Locke’s equality is deeply shaped by Christian premises, and Witte traces Calvinist contributions to rights, constitutionalism, and religious liberty (Waldron 2002; Witte 2007). Moyn documents the role of Christian personalism in the rise of rights language around the Second World War (Moyn 2015). An account claiming that modern rights are wholly secular would fail this record.

These strands support three importantly different strategies. An *authority-only* strategy moves from supreme authorship to rights; that is the paper’s primary conceptual target. A *command-content* strategy argues that particular commands create directed duties among humans. A *nature, worth, or natural-law* strategy grounds protections in divine goodness, bestowed worth, created goods, or practical reason.

The second strategy can generate genuine claims in particular cases, and the third can form a developed rights theory. Neither should be judged by the weaknesses of the first.

These concessions are not diplomatic decoration. They change the argument. The question is not whether biblical and Christian traditions contain rights-generating resources. They plainly do. The question is whether those resources establish *exclusive* ownership or whether bare divine authority can do the work without further moral interpretation. The strongest case makes that narrower question unavoidable.

5 Why Authorship Alone Is Not Grounding

Suppose a perfectly good creator commands all humans to respect one another. That command may generate obligations within a divine-command theory. Indeed, a sufficiently specific command can create a directed duty: if Ben is commanded not to take Alia's property, Alia may thereby possess a claim against Ben within that theory. The concession matters. The remaining question is not whether commands can ever support claims, but whether authorship alone supplies a complete and universal rights doctrine. Three further questions remain.

First, who holds which claims against whom? "Do not steal" can support a property claim, but it does not by itself settle whether the rule protects every person, what counts as property, whether necessity supplies an exception, whether the holder can waive the claim, or what remedy follows. Hohfeld's structure does not disappear because a command has ultimate authorship. The command's content must still be interpreted into relations among agents.

Second, what is the duty-bearing domain? A defender may say that universal human rights are held by every human and bind human agents, while the creator who grounds those rights is not another member of the regulated class. That answer does not narrow universal *human possession*; it rejects the further claim that the right binds every possible agent. The distinction should be granted rather than hidden.

It also changes what the canonical cases can establish. If the deity is outside the duty-bearing domain, a narrated divine act is not automatically a counterexample to a universal human right. The sharper question is whether the account supplies stable duties among humans while permitting selected human agents to enslave, kill, dispossess, or coerce others under claimed authorization. A theory may allow some such acts as judgment, war, or punishment, but it must state the criteria that distinguish a principled limitation from a status-based exemption. Source accountability—whether the deity is also constrained—is a further theological question, not a premise required by the paper's core underdetermination argument.

This is not merely a verbal complaint. Imagine a constitution that declares torture forbidden but adds that the president may define any presidential act as "not torture." Because the president is plainly within the constitutional domain, the clause does not give detainees an independent protection against presidential reclassification. The analogy does not decide whether a creator is similarly situated. It shows why every account must say who falls within the domain and how principled exceptions are distinguished from discretionary relabeling.

Third, how do humans know which commands express the necessarily good nature? If moral understanding helps identify authentic revelation, interpret difficult passages, and reject apparent commands of cruelty, then moral judgment is not a dispensable product of divine authorship. It is part of the route by which the content of obligation becomes known. If accepted authorship instead settles every moral question, conduct can no longer test the source: whatever the accepted source commands will count as good by definition.

The dilemma is therefore not the crude Euthyphro question alone. A sophisticated Christian theory can say that goodness is neither arbitrary command nor an external standard above the deity; it is anchored in a necessary loving nature. The remaining epistemic question is how finite readers distinguish

that nature from their interpretations of texts and commands. A label such as “perfect justice” cannot do this discriminating work if it is compatible with every possible treatment of persons.

The authority-constraint test shows what the theological account must add:

1. a determinate account of the relevant divine nature;
2. a bridge from that nature to equal human status or protected interests;
3. a rule defining the duty-bearing domain and the exceptions permitted within it;
4. an account of human access to genuine commands; and
5. a way for apparent counterevidence to count against an interpretation.

Once those additions are visible, the argument has improved. It has also surrendered the slogan that only an ultimate author is needed. The content of particular commands, the moral theory surrounding them, and the epistemic bridges now carry much of the weight.

6 The Canonical Stress Test

The Bible is a library formed across centuries, genres, communities, and political settings. It is therefore unsurprising that readers find both emancipatory and hierarchical materials. The relevant mistake is to quote the emancipatory stream as though it exhausted the canon, or the hierarchical stream as though no counter-current existed.

Table 2 applies a symmetrical test to six central protections. The first column identifies materials a Christian defender can reasonably invoke. The second identifies canonical pressure. The third asks what interpretive work is required before a stable rights conclusion follows.

Table 2: The biblical record contains rights-supporting resources and serious counter-pressure.

Protection	Supporting material	Canonical pressure	Bridge still needed
Life and bodily security	Gen. 1:26–27 and 9:6 connect human status with protection from bloodshed; neighbor love centers care	Deut. 20:16–18 and 1 Sam. 15:3 narrate total-destruction commands; capital penalties are extensive	Explain scope, genre, authority, protected persons, and why judgment does not empty the equal claim
Freedom from slavery	Exodus remembers liberation; debt release limits some Israelite servitude; Gal. 3:28 relativizes legal status	Lev. 25:44–46 permits inheritable foreign slaves; Eph. 6:5 and 1 Pet. 2:18 address enslaved persons without abolishing mastery	Show why a universal anti-slavery right follows despite permissions and household codes
Bodily and family standing	Male and female alike bear the divine image; women appear as judges, prophets, patrons, and witnesses	Deut. 21:10–14 places a captive woman’s marriage within the victor’s power; Num. 31:17–18 differentiates female captives by sexual status	Explain how equal bodily agency governs conquest, marriage, sexuality, inheritance, and household authority
Freedom of conscience	Prophets criticize corrupt worship; later communities live without state control; faith cannot be genuine if merely forced	Deut. 13:6–11 prescribes death for enticing others to rival worship; covenant law joins religious and civil loyalty	Defend a development or moral principle that rejects coercion rather than treating it as timeless authority
Equal civic standing	Deut. 10:18–19 protects resident aliens; Isa. 10:1–2 condemns partial rule; Gal. 3:28 announces communal equality	Covenant, sex, lineage, free status, and membership affect offices, inheritance, ritual standing, and penalties	Identify which equality is moral, civic, eschatological, or communal and how it becomes a universal public claim
Property and dispossession	Theft and boundary-moving are condemned; debt release and jubilee limit accumulated domination	Conquest narratives distribute land and spoil; foreign captives may become inheritable property	State a universal rule of title, restitution, necessity, and war that can judge both insiders and outsiders

6.1 Life and narrated destruction

The biblical tradition represents the deity as ordering the destruction of populations, including children, in texts such as Deuteronomy 20 and 1 Samuel 15. Whether those narratives report events exactly as they occurred is a different question. Ancient conquest accounts often use conventional totalizing rhetoric, and some interpreters accordingly narrow the historical claim (Younger 1990). Niditch's broader study likewise identifies multiple and morally different war ideologies within the Hebrew Bible rather than one simple position (Niditch 1993). Historical and literary qualification can reduce the claim about actual victims. It does not by itself remove the normative representation: the text still places language of comprehensive destruction within an authorized command.

A defender may reply that divine judgment is categorically different from murder. Morriston argues that such appeals face severe moral and epistemic problems, especially for an inerrantist reading (Morriston 2009). The present paper does not need to settle every issue in that debate or assume that the deity belongs within a human right's duty-bearing domain. It asks a more limited question: what principled rule permits human agents, under claimed authorization, to kill noncombatants while preserving equal human standing? "The source is just" restates the conclusion unless readers can identify what justice requires clearly enough to assess the authorization.

Consider a school whose anti-bullying policy has one exception: harm ordered by the principal does not count as bullying. The exception may reflect genuine disciplinary authority; not every restraint is abuse. But the policy does not protect students until it distinguishes proportionate discipline from whatever the principal prefers. Authority is relevant. It is not self-interpreting.

6.2 Slavery and status

The biblical canon also contains both liberation memory and slavery regulation. Israel's escape from Egypt has fueled abolitionist and civil-rights movements. Debt-release provisions limit some forms of servitude among Israelites. Yet Leviticus 25:44–46 permits Israelites to acquire slaves from surrounding nations and pass them to children as inherited property. New Testament household codes direct enslaved persons to obey masters; Philemon may encourage transformed treatment of Onesimus but does not announce legal abolition.

Glancy's study of early Christianity emphasizes the movement's pervasive participation in a slaveholding world rather than a simple break from it (Glancy 2002). This historical fact does not prove that Christian premises can never support abolition. It shows that the anti-slavery inference was not automatic. Abolitionist readers selected, extended, and morally prioritized some themes over others, while defenders of slavery did the same with different texts.

The historical conflict makes the underdetermination concrete. Abolitionists could treat Exodus, equal creation, and neighbor love as controlling principles; defenders of slavery could treat patriarchal practice, Leviticus, and household codes as authorization. The shared canon supplied both sides with materials, so the decisive anti-slavery conclusion required a further principle: no person's status, ethnicity, debt, conquest, or legal classification permits ownership by another.

6.3 Bodily and family standing

The concern about women should not be reduced to a general reference to patriarchy. Genesis 1:27 includes male and female human beings within the divine image, and biblical narratives give women consequential roles as judges, prophets, patrons, and witnesses. Those materials can support equal standing. Other legal and narrative materials presuppose male-headed households in which women's sexual, marital, and inheritance positions are not symmetrical with men's.

Deuteronomy 21:10–14 is a useful hard case because it combines a modest protection with a coercive setting. A victorious soldier who desires a captive woman must allow mourning and may not later sell her,

yet the woman's entry into the household begins with military defeat and the victor's choice. Pressler's analysis places this law within a wider Deuteronomic family structure that both protects dependents in some respects and presupposes substantial authority in the male head of household (Pressler 1993). Numbers 31:17–18 is harder still: female captives are sorted by sexual status after the killing of other captives. These texts do not prove that no Christian account can support bodily autonomy. They show why equal agency does not emerge from textual citation alone; the defender must identify a principle capable of judging conquest, consent, marriage, and household power together.

6.4 Religious liberty and unequal civic standing

Freedom of religion is particularly revealing because the Bible's religious authority can be used both to protect and to restrict it. Persecuted minorities drew on conscience and covenant to demand toleration. Reformation conflicts helped produce institutional arguments for limiting church and state. Yet Deuteronomy 13 prescribes death for a close relative or friend who entices another toward rival worship. The text does not treat freedom of conscience as an immunity against religious authority.

A developmental reading can respond: ancient covenantal law served a particular polity, while later theological principles support pluralism. That is a serious position. It also confirms this paper's point. The modern right follows through a hermeneutic that limits some commands and extends other principles. The Bible participates in the argument; it does not settle the argument without that interpretive bridge.

The same pattern holds for equality. "Equal before the deity" may mean equal moral worth, equal access to salvation, equal membership in a worshiping community, equal civil status, or equal political power. These are not interchangeable. A church can affirm equal salvation while reserving authority by sex. A state can proclaim equal dignity while denying the vote. To derive a public right, the defender must say which equality is intended and which institutions it constrains.

6.5 Property and dispossession

Property reveals another mixed pattern. Commands against theft and moving boundary stones assume that wrongful taking can violate a person's claim. Debt release and jubilee provisions limit permanent accumulation and protect households from some forms of domination. Yet conquest narratives distribute land and spoil taken from defeated peoples, and Leviticus 25 permits foreign slaves to pass as inherited property. A prohibition on theft therefore does not by itself settle who may hold title, whose prior possession counts, or what conquest changes.

Consider two households claiming the same field. One points to long residence; the other points to a ruler's grant after conquest. Saying "do not steal" cannot decide between them until a theory specifies legitimate acquisition, dispossession, restitution, and the moral relevance of war. The example does not show that biblical property rules are uniquely defective. It shows that a universal property right, like its secular rivals, needs principles that can evaluate the legal classifications from which existing titles arose.

7 From Canonical Tension to a Better Conclusion

The stress test does not warrant the sweeping claim that the Bible is simply hostile to human rights. Nor does it warrant the opposite claim that modern rights are plainly written into the canon. It tests canonical sufficiency, not the metaphysical truth of Christianity: needing interpretation does not make a doctrine false, since every moral theory requires interpretation. The evidence supports a more exact conclusion.

The biblical library contains *moral resources*: narratives of liberation, critiques of rulers, equalizing creation language, solidarity with outsiders, and duties toward vulnerable persons. It also contains *moral liabilities*: slavery permissions, patriarchal hierarchy, coercive worship, group-specific law, and

divinely authorized violence. Traditions turn this mixed inheritance into a rights theory through selection, synthesis, development, and moral judgment.

This distinction matters because “compatible with” is weaker than “derived from.” Many political systems are compatible with the sentence “love your neighbor,” but the sentence alone does not specify electoral rules, due process, labor rights, asylum standards, or the limits of police power. The difference appears in ordinary disputes: neighbor love can motivate both generous asylum and a restrictive policy said to protect existing neighbors. The slogan becomes a public rule only after interpreters identify whose interests count, how risks are compared, and what procedures protect the excluded party.

It also matters because interpretation can become outcome-driven. If a rights-supporting passage is treated as a timeless principle while a rights-threatening passage is confined to culture, judgment, genre, or progressive revelation, the reader needs a rule explaining the asymmetry. The canon is diachronic—formed over time—and a Christian may reasonably give later or Christological material interpretive priority. The paper does not assume that every legal provision must state a modern right with equal clarity. It asks for a principled account of why the character and teaching of Jesus, for example, control some earlier commands and how judgments about love, harm, and equal standing guide that rule. Once those premises are doing the work, the bare fact of biblical inclusion is not sufficient by itself.

The result is not that external moral reasoning contaminates revelation or that interpretive dependence disproves divine inspiration. Every reading uses judgments about genre, centrality, continuity, and application. The narrower question is whether those judgments are stated and defended. A rights theory becomes more credible when it names its bridges instead of crediting the canon alone with conclusions that arise only after extensive reconstruction.

8 The Genealogy Is Braided, Not Binary

The historical alternatives are not “the Bible invented rights” and “secular philosophers invented rights.” Rights vocabulary and institutions developed through a braided history. This section therefore addresses historical ownership only. A mixed genealogy does not prove that a Christian justification is false, just as discovering several builders of a courthouse does not settle whether its judgments are sound.

Tierney’s work traces subjective natural-rights language through medieval canon lawyers and theologians (Tierney 1997). Reformation debates over conscience, ecclesial authority, resistance, and political covenant contributed to later liberties (Witte 2007). Locke’s political equality cannot be understood without its Christian framework, even though later readers could detach parts of the argument from that theology (Waldron 2002). These streams make a simple secularization story untenable.

The Enlightenment and revolutionary era nevertheless changed the scale, subject, and political use of rights. Hunt emphasizes new forms of empathy, challenges to torture, and public declarations in the eighteenth century (Hunt 2007). The American and French declarations turned natural-rights language against inherited authority while notoriously excluding enslaved people, women, Indigenous populations, and others. Universal language arrived before universal application.

The abolition of slavery further resists single-source ownership. Christian abolitionists mobilized Exodus, equal creation, and neighbor love. Christian defenders cited patriarchs, Levitical law, Pauline household codes, and social order. Enslaved people did not merely wait for an intellectual tradition to discover their freedom: escape, revolt, testimony, petition, mutual aid, and Black leadership made them agents in abolition, a role Sinha places at the center of the movement’s history (Sinha 2016). Political economy, secular reform, revolutionary ideals, and changing moral sentiments also mattered. The historical lesson is not that scripture was irrelevant. It is that a shared canon did not mechanically choose the emancipatory side.

Twentieth-century human rights add another turn. Moyn argues that “human rights” became the dominant language of transnational moral aspiration later than triumphalist histories suggest, while his

study of Christian human rights documents the influence of Christian personalism around the Second World War (Moyn 2010; Moyn 2015). These accounts are contested, but together they make chronology and institutional context unavoidable.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights supplies a concrete case of plural authorship. Eleanor Roosevelt chaired the drafting process; Peng-chun Chang brought a Confucian and pluralist perspective; Charles Malik drew on Christian philosophy; and René Cassin, John Humphrey, Hernán Santa Cruz, Hansa Mehta, and many others shaped the text (Morsink 1999; United Nations n.d.[a]). Mehta's intervention is especially tangible: the Indian delegate is widely credited with changing Article 1's proposed "all men" to "all human beings" (United Nations n.d.[b]). That two-word change made the declaration's stated bearer class match its universal aspiration.

The process was neither culturally uniform nor unanimously enthusiastic. More than fifty member states participated in the final drafting. The General Assembly then adopted the Declaration on 10 December 1948 by 48 votes in favor, none against, eight abstentions, and two non-voting members (United Nations General Assembly 1948a). Waltz's study of diplomatic records shows that Muslim-majority states were active and internally diverse participants rather than a silent bloc (Waltz 2004). Later decolonization further changed the human-rights agenda as Asian, African, and Arab states pressed claims concerning self-determination, racial domination, and international accountability (Burke 2010). The drafting record supports practical agreement across deep differences; it does not show agreement on one metaphysical foundation.

This plural authorship is not a defect. A bridge built by engineers from several traditions does not become weaker because no single engineer owns it. Shared construction can make a norm more publicly available, provided the reasons offered are genuinely accessible and the resulting institutions remain open to criticism. The analogy establishes a historical point about cooperative construction; it does not establish that the completed norm is morally correct.

The best historical conclusion is therefore bidirectional:

- Biblical and Christian ideas were among the important sources from which natural rights, equality, conscience, and dignity developed.
- Modern human rights also arose through classical, legal, Enlightenment, revolutionary, abolitionist, socialist, feminist, anti-colonial, non-Christian, and postwar political sources that corrected or resisted inherited hierarchies.

Contribution is not ownership. The historical evidence therefore defeats a sole-genealogy claim. Whether any religious or secular justification is ultimately true must be decided by its reasons rather than by its pedigree.

9 Non-Theistic Rights Are Not Government Gifts

The apologetic argument often assumes that without a divine legislator, rights must be whatever governments declare. That is false even before one decides which moral theory is correct.

A moral realist can hold that objective normative reasons exist without a deity; Enoch, for example, explicitly defends robust moral realism rather than reducing morality to social approval (Enoch 2011). Hart's equal right to freedom, Raz's protected-interest account, and Griffin's personhood account differ sharply, yet none treats government enactment as the source of moral validity (Hart 1955; Raz 1986; Griffin 2008). A contractualist can argue that fair principles emerge from reciprocal justification among persons who recognize one another as equals. A practice-based theorist can justify international rights by the functions they serve in limiting sovereignty and protecting urgent interests (Beitz 2009; Buchanan 2013).

These views face hard questions. Which interests are sufficient? Why equal standing? How should rights conflicts be resolved? Can rights survive widespread rejection? Theistic views face parallel questions about revelation, interpretation, command identification, exceptions, and divine nature. The existence of unanswered questions on one side is not evidence that the other side wins by default.

Even an anti-realist or institutional account need not reduce rights to a ruler's whim. Human-made rules can constrain their makers. A city fire code is written by people, yet inspectors can invoke it against the mayor's preferred building. A constitution is a social artifact, yet courts, elections, professional norms, protest movements, and divided powers can make it costly for officials to ignore. This analogy makes a limited point: construction does not entail practical emptiness. It does not by itself prove objective moral truth.

The limits should be admitted. No institution is indestructible. Courts can be captured, publics can become cruel, and rights can lose enforcement. But theological belief does not remove that practical fragility. A divine command unknown, disputed, or selectively interpreted cannot protect a prisoner by itself. Human beings must still transmit, interpret, institutionalize, and enforce it. On the ground, every rights system depends on human practices even if its defenders posit a transcendent truth.

This reveals a symmetry. If political violation disproves secular grounding, then centuries of religiously authorized violation should disprove theological grounding. If the theological defender rightly distinguishes divine norm from human disobedience, the secular defender may distinguish moral norm from government violation. The same conceptual courtesy must be extended to both.

10 The Strongest Objections

10.1 "The divine image supplies the missing universal status"

This is the strongest compact Christian reply. If every person bears the divine image, equal worth does not depend on government recognition, talent, belief, or obedience. Wolterstorff develops a richer version in which divine love bestows worth and grounds rights (Wolterstorff 2008).

The reply can support a developed theory, but the phrase *imago Dei* is not yet a complete premise. Competing interpretations locate the image in capacities, relations, vocation, representation, or destiny (Clines 1968; Middleton 2005). A capacity account may endanger inclusion of infants or severely disabled persons unless carefully stated. A vocational account identifies a task more directly than an inviolable status. A relational account must explain why the relation generates particular duties. The defender must select a meaning, show that it applies equally, and connect it to the claimed protection.

The canonical counterexamples then return. If image-bearers may be enslaved, killed as a group, or coerced in worship under authorized law, what content does the status secure? A defender may answer through development, covenantal scope, or a necessarily loving nature. Those are possible bridges. They are not contained in the slogan alone.

10.2 "Perfect goodness prevents arbitrary revocation"

On Adams's account, obligations arise from the commands of a loving deity, not a capricious will (Adams 1999). Therefore, the defender argues, rights are not temporary favors. Necessary goodness guarantees their stability.

This answer is coherent at the level of theory. It also shows that *goodness and love*, rather than sheer power, prevent arbitrariness. The public dispute moves to the content and accessibility of those concepts. If a text represents conduct that would ordinarily count as enslavement, collective killing, or religious coercion, readers need a reason why perfect goodness authorizes it without making the rights empty. Merely repeating that the agent is perfectly good cannot distinguish an apparent revelation from a moral misattribution.

10.3 “The creator grounds rights without being bound by them”

A lawmaker can establish a role-bound duty without becoming a party to every relation the law creates. Likewise, a theological account may say that the creator grounds duties among human beings but is not one more human duty-bearer. Universal human rights would then be universal in bearer scope without governing every possible agent.

That reply succeeds against any argument that simply defines universality as a claim against the deity. The present argument does not require that definition. It asks whether bare authorship identifies equal claims among humans and constrains the human authorities to whom those claims apply. If the account also says that selected rulers, soldiers, household heads, or religious officials may override those claims under divine authorization, it must supply a criterion for those exceptions. Placing the deity outside the domain settles who is bound; it does not settle what the human duties are.

10.4 “A command can create a claim-right”

Yes. A command directing Ben not to strike Alia can, within a divine-command theory, place Ben under a duty whose beneficiary is Alia. It would be a mistake to say that commands produce only free-floating obligations.

The concession narrows the dispute to sufficiency. A particular command may create a particular claim while leaving its bearer class, duration, priority, waiver, exceptions, and remedy unsettled. The biblical record also contains commands addressed to limited groups and commands permitting unequal treatment. The paper therefore rejects the move from *a command can create a claim* to *bare divine authority uniquely supplies a complete universal rights doctrine*.

10.5 “Judgment is not a rights violation”

Rights are rarely exceptionless. Imprisonment after due process, defensive force, quarantine, and taxation can restrict liberty without abolishing rights. The critic therefore cannot infer from every biblical punishment that no rights exist.

Correct. The relevant test is not “was power ever used?” It is whether exceptions are publicly principled, proportionate, and consistent with equal status. A court may imprison a convicted assailant, but it must distinguish guilt, evidence, process, and penalty. Infants killed for group identity, foreigners held as inheritable property, or apostates executed for persuasion raise precisely these questions. Calling the outcome “judgment” names a category; it does not supply the missing proportionality and agency analysis.

10.6 “Ancient war rhetoric was hyperbolic”

Ancient Near Eastern conquest texts often speak in comprehensive formulas even when later narratives presuppose survivors (Younger 1990). A nonliteral or historically critical reading can therefore weaken claims that a literal extermination occurred.

That is a real qualification and should be welcomed. The paper’s argument concerns the moral authority readers attribute to the text. If hyperbole means “defeat the military order” rather than “kill every child,” the hardest case changes. The defender must show how that reading fits the immediate commands and later use. More importantly, adopting a genre-sensitive and fallibilist hermeneutic concedes the need for interpretive standards beyond literal surface authority. That is not a defeat for Christianity; it is the cost of a stronger account and a reason not to attribute the completed rights doctrine to bare textual inclusion.

10.7 “Every moral theory requires interpretation”

Correct. Secular constitutions contain contested clauses, interest theories disagree about which interests matter, and contractualists dispute which objections are reasonable. Interpretive dependence therefore cannot show that Christianity is false or uniquely defective.

The relevant comparison is narrower. When someone claims that the Bible *uniquely and sufficiently* supplies a modern rights doctrine, extensive reliance on disputed rules of genre, development, priority, and moral fit counts against the word “sufficient.” The same interpretive standard should be applied to rivals. A theory is not refuted because it needs judgment; a monopoly claim is weakened when it presents those judgments as though they were delivered by the source alone.

10.8 “Christian history generated the West’s rights tradition”

Medieval canon law, Reformation political theology, Locke’s Christianity, abolitionist churches, and Christian personalism are too important to erase (Tierney 1997; Witte 2007; Waldron 2002; Moyn 2015). The claim of contribution is well supported.

The inference to exclusivity is not. The same history contains religious persecution, colonial domination, slavery defense, gender hierarchy, and resistance to equal citizenship. Classical philosophy, Roman law, Enlightenment criticism, enslaved and colonized peoples, labor movements, feminists, secular reformers, and non-Christian drafters also shaped the practice. The proper historical verb is often “contributed,” “translated,” “contested,” or “reconstructed,” not “created alone.”

10.9 “A mixed genealogy cannot decide moral truth”

This objection identifies the genetic fallacy: accepting or rejecting a claim merely because of its origin. A plural history of rights cannot prove that the rights are valid, and a Christian history of rights could not prove them valid either.

The paper uses genealogy for a different purpose. When the claim under examination is historical ownership—that one tradition gave humanity its rights—evidence of independent, resistant, and collaborative contributors directly bears on that claim. Normative justification remains a separate contest. A developed Christian argument may win that contest even after exclusive historical ownership has been rejected.

10.10 “Without transcendence, rights are only preferences”

This objection shifts from history to metaethics. It argues that no naturalistic fact can generate an objective obligation. Even if true, it would not show that the Bible is the exclusive source; it would at most create demand for some non-natural or theistic grounding. Competing realist, constructivist, contractualist, interest-based, and practice-based accounts would still require comparison.

The objection also risks treating moral importance as evidence for ontology. We urgently want torture, slavery, and arbitrary killing to be wrong regardless of approval. That desire is a reason to investigate foundations carefully, not a premise establishing one foundation. A life jacket is needed during a storm, but its necessity does not prove that the first jacket offered will float.

11 A Constructive Test for Rights-Ownership Claims

The conclusion is not merely negative. Any tradition—religious or secular—can make a stronger rights claim by passing eight tests tailored to the ambiguities exposed above.

Table 3: A practical audit for claims to ground or own human rights.

Test	Question the account must answer
Conceptual precision	Is the alleged right a claim, liberty, power, immunity, legal protection, moral demand, or international norm?
Bearer and duty scope	Who possesses the right, which agents owe the duty, and does equal possession extend across belief, sex, ancestry, status, ability, and obedience?
Normative bridge	Why does the person's interest, status, choice, relation, or good place those agents under a duty?
Limits and conflicts	Which restrictions are justified, how are competing rights prioritized, and what prevents an exception from becoming arbitrary discretion?
Canonical derivation	If scripture is claimed as sufficient, which rule selects, orders, develops, or limits its divergent materials?
Counterexample discipline	What evidence or case would show that the proposed source does not yield the advertised right?
Genealogical honesty	Which other traditions, conflicts, excluded groups, and later reinterpretations materially produced the current practice?
Institutional path	How will the right be recognized, interpreted, enforced, corrected, and protected from capture?

These questions turn slogans into research programs. A Christian account might answer that divine love bestows equal worth, that every human bears the relevant status while human authorities bear the political duties, that the incarnational and neighbor-love traditions control interpretation, and that constitutional pluralism is required because humans are fallible interpreters. A secular account might answer that urgent interests and equal agency justify claims, that reciprocal institutions constrain officials, and that rights lists must be revised when excluded persons expose contradictions. Both accounts become clearer when they distinguish universality from absoluteness and state where they can fail.

The test also disciplines political rhetoric. A government that praises universal rights abroad while denying due process at home fails equal scope and institutional path. A church that invokes the divine image against abortion while ignoring torture or racial domination must explain the asymmetry. A secular state that treats rights as public relations while suppressing dissent cannot hide behind non-theological language. No tradition receives automatic immunity.

12 Conclusion

The apologetic argument began with a genuine concern: a right that depends only on a ruler's present goodwill offers weak protection against that ruler. But the proposed solution does not follow. Governments can violate rights without defining them out of existence, and non-theistic theories do not reduce moral rights to whatever statutes say. Divine commands can generate directed claims among humans, but bare authorship does not determine the complete content, bearer class, duty-bearing domain, permitted limits, priority rules, or remedies of universal rights.

The biblical record is mixed in the precise way a mature argument should expect from a multi-century canon. Creation in the divine image, liberation, covenantal limits, care for strangers, prophetic criticism, neighbor love, and equality formulas have powered emancipatory movements. Slavery permissions, religious coercion, unequal family and civic standing, conquest, and narrated destruction have powered hierarchy and resistance to reform. A Christian rights theory can prioritize, develop, and reinterpret this inheritance, including through a Christological reading. That may be principled and true. It nevertheless

means that moral and hermeneutical bridges, rather than bare inclusion in the canon, help generate the completed doctrine.

History delivers a different but convergent verdict. Biblical and Christian sources matter, as do canon law, Reformation struggles, Locke, abolitionist religion, and Christian personalism. So do classical thought, Enlightenment criticism, revolutionary declarations, enslaved resistance, feminism, labor, anti-colonial politics, secular philosophy, non-Christian traditions, world war, and negotiated international institutions. Modern human rights are a braided achievement. That historical finding defeats sole genealogy; it does not decide which moral foundation is true.

The warranted conclusion is therefore narrower and stronger than either origin myth. Sole biblical genealogy is contradicted by the plural record. Canonical sufficiency is not established without additional principles of interpretation and moral priority. Normative necessity is not established while serious theistic and non-theistic theories remain in contention. Institutional security requires human practices under either metaphysics. A developed Christian grounding remains a live philosophical option, but bare authority and exclusive ownership do not establish it. The practical implication is simple: ask who holds the right, who owes the duty, what bridge supplies its content, what limits remain principled, what history produced it, and which institutions make the protection real.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The paper contains three distinct but convergent arguments. Argument X tests whether bare divine authorship is sufficient to ground universal rights. Argument Y tests whether the canon alone supplies a determinate modern rights doctrine. Argument Z tests exclusive historical ownership. Keeping them separate prevents an interpretive or historical premise from being mistaken for a verdict about metaphysical truth.

Argument X: Bare authorship is insufficient

- X1.** A complete doctrine of universal human rights must identify the right-holders, the relevant duty-bearers, the protected interests or choices, and the rules governing conflicts, exceptions, and remedies.
- X2.** Bare authorship or supreme authority establishes who may issue commands; by itself, it does not determine those features of a rights doctrine.
- X3.** Particular commands can create directed claims, and developed Christian theories can add premises about divine love, necessary goodness, natural law, human worth, or protected goods.
- X4.** Those contentful commands and moral premises do explanatory work not contained in the bare fact of supreme authorship.
- X5.** Therefore, bare divine authorship is insufficient to ground a complete doctrine of universal human rights.
- X6.** This conclusion leaves open whether a developed theistic theory containing the additional premises is true or better supported than its rivals.

Validity and support. X5 follows from X1–X4 once “bare” authorship means authority without particular command content or a wider moral bridge. X1 states what completeness requires; X2 follows from the limited information contained in authorship alone; X3 concedes the strongest command-content and developed-theory replies; and X4 identifies why those replies abandon the authority-only inference. X6 blocks an anti-theistic overreach. The argument does not assume that the deity belongs within the human duty-bearing domain.

Argument Y: The canon is not sufficient by itself

- Y1.** If the canon by itself sufficiently yields a modern universal rights doctrine, the move from its central materials to that doctrine should not depend on indispensable added rules of moral priority, development, or limitation.
- Y2.** The canon contains genuine resources for dignity, liberation, equal status, and restraint of rulers.
- Y3.** It also contains permissions or commands concerning slavery, coercive worship, unequal family and civic status, conquest, dispossession, and narrated destruction.
- Y4.** Moving from that mixed record to a modern rights doctrine requires substantive rules that select, order, extend, and limit canonical materials.
- Y5.** Therefore, the canon is not sufficient *by itself* in the stipulated sense.

Y6. This conclusion is compatible with a principled Christological or natural-law reconstruction and does not imply that Christianity is false.

Validity and support. Y5 follows from Y1–Y4 given the stated meaning of “by itself.” Y2 and Y3 are interpretive premises supported by the symmetrical canonical comparison; Y4 identifies the bridge visible whenever interpreters privilege universal image-bearing or neighbor love over the counter-material. The inference concerns sufficiency, not truth. Y6 records the live developed alternatives.

Argument Z: Sole historical ownership is unwarranted

- Z1.** A tradition can claim sole historical ownership of modern human rights only if the relevant language, protections, and institutions are adequately explained without independent, resistant, and collaborative contributions from other sources.
- Z2.** The record includes major biblical and Christian contributions, but also classical and legal inheritance, Enlightenment criticism, revolutionary politics, enslaved resistance, feminism, labor, anti-colonial action, non-Christian diplomacy, and negotiated international institutions.
- Z3.** The drafting of the Universal Declaration illustrates such collaboration: participants from divergent traditions altered both its language and its protected interests.
- Z4.** Therefore, sole historical ownership by the Bible or Christianity is not warranted.
- Z5.** This historical conclusion does not determine whether a Christian, secular, or plural moral justification is true.

Validity and support. Z4 is an evidence-based historical conclusion rather than a deductive verdict about every causal influence. Z1 states the ownership criterion; Z2 and Z3 are supported by the documented genealogy and remain revisable with historical scholarship. Z5 prevents the genetic fallacy: origins and justification are separate questions.

Joint conclusion

Together, X, Y, and Z show why the simple apologetic inference fails in three different ways. Conceptually, authority alone is not yet a theory of rights. Canonically, a mixed library does not become a determinate modern code without interpretive and moral bridges. Historically, one major contributor is not thereby the sole owner. None of those conclusions refutes a developed Christian grounding. The constructive burden for every account is to state its rights concept, bearer and duty scope, normative bridge, limits, response to counterexamples, genealogy, and institutional path.

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