

The Amalekite Infants

Divine Command, Collective Punishment, and the Collapse of Christian Moral Discernment

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Central claim

For Christians who affirm that the biblical deity did or could authorize the intentional killing of infants, the defense cannot preserve ordinary non-agent protection, a portable test for judging divine claimants, and the command’s goodness all at once. If the same powers and reasons would not exculpate a rival deity, identity rather than a general moral difference controls the verdict. Historical or fallibilist readings can reject the authorization, and consistent voluntarism can make divine identity decisive; the narrower conclusion is that neither route preserves the command as good *and* moral conduct as an independent test of revelation.

Preview:

Diagnostic case	Portable bridge	Defensive pressure	Bounded result
An infant cannot inherit adult agency, join a battle, or answer for ancestral wrongdoing.	Hold the command, powers, purposes, and alleged reasons fixed while changing only the deity’s identity.	Each rescue must deny the authorization, generalize to the rival, or make accepted identity decisive.	The coherent exits carry doctrinal or epistemic costs; source-specific exemption is not independent discernment.

The argument is conditional: it does not require the narrated event to be historical, every Christian to read it literally, or moral realism to be true.

Visual preview:

The Amalekite Infants: The Collapse of Moral Discernment

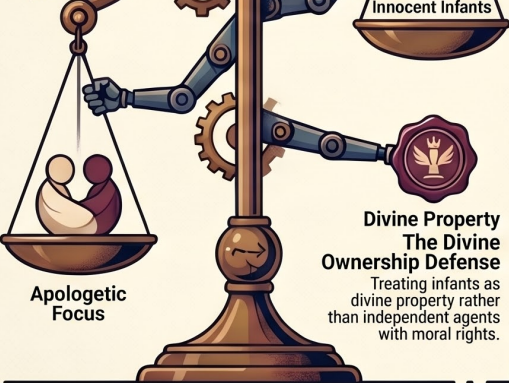
The Apologetic Pivot

Shifting Focus to Wicked Adults

Diverting the moral question from innocent infants to the alleged wickedness of their parents.



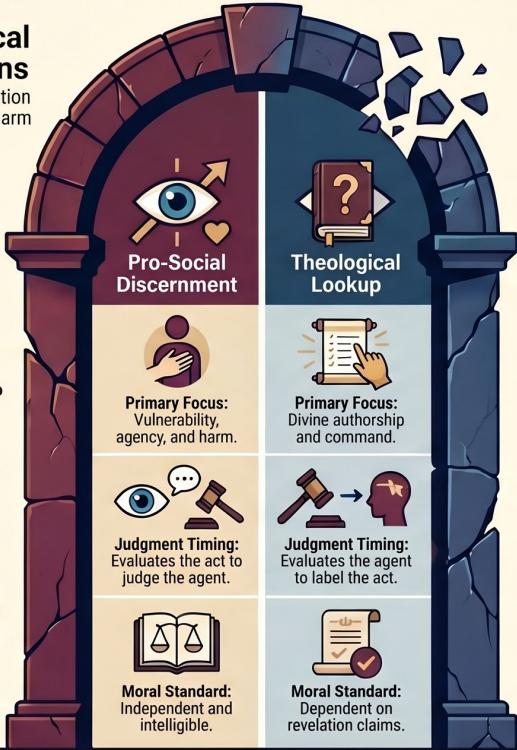
Original Sin



Metaphysical Redefinitions

Afterlife Compensation to erase temporal harm

Divine Property
The Divine Ownership Defense
Treating infants as divine property rather than independent agents with moral rights.



The Epistemic Cost

Moral Knowledge by "Theological Lookup"

Goodness is only identified after checking if God authorized the specific act.



Retrospective Authorization

The word "good" ceases to track compassion and becomes a label for authority.

The Loss of Independent Discernment

Evaluative language fails when it cannot distinguish between protecting and slaughtering children.

The diagram keeps the non-agent infant in view while contrasting act-first evaluation with theological lookup. It maps the recurrent pressure toward retrospective authorization; it does not by itself settle historical genre, moral realism, or every Christian interpretation.

Abstract

First Samuel 15 represents Samuel as ordering Saul, in the name of the biblical deity, to destroy Amalek and to include children and infants. Contemporary defenses often answer with adult wickedness, collective judgment, ancient war rhetoric, divine ownership, afterlife compensation, hidden reasons, or the claim that a genuine divine command fixes the act's moral status. This paper asks a narrower question than whether the narrated event occurred or whether moral realism is true: what must a Christian defender surrender in order to affirm that intentional infant killing was, or could have been, good? The infant is diagnostic because ordinary accounts of culpability depend on agency, while an infant cannot participate in ancestral wrongdoing, battle, or refusal to repent. I distinguish textual representation from historical execution and grant that a genuinely nonliteral or fallibilist reading can remove the target. For defenders who retain the literal or counterfactual authorization, I introduce a source-switch test that holds the command, creator status, knowledge, purpose, alternatives, and alleged reasons fixed while changing only the deity's identity. The test exposes a three-way pressure. A defense must generalize to the rival, in which case the command cannot independently disqualify that rival; deny the authorization, accepting a hermeneutic or doctrinal cost; or make accepted divine identity decisive, preserving a coherent voluntarism while conceding that conduct no longer independently tests the source. The conclusion is conditional and metaethically modest. It does not disprove Christianity or theism, diagnose believers, or establish stance-independent wrongness. It shows that source-specific exculpation converts moral discernment into retrospective authorization unless a relevant, portable difference is supplied.

Keywords: Amalek; divine command theory; collective punishment; moral epistemology; biblical violence; skeptical theism; moral discernment

1. The Infant Is the Diagnostic Case

First Samuel 15:2–3 represents Samuel as recalling Amalek's attack on Israel and relaying a command to Saul to place the population under destruction, expressly including women, children, infants, and animals. The chapter then presents Saul's incomplete execution of the ban as disobedience. Exegetical disputes matter, but the narrative's evaluative direction is not neutral: within the story, restraint toward what has been placed under the ban is not praised as moral insight (Tsumura, 2007).

The infant matters because the infant blocks a common change of subject. Adults can be described as combatants, oppressors, idolaters, or participants in a violent social order. A nation can be described as a collective threat. None of those descriptions supplies an infant with agency. A nursing child did not attack Israel during the exodus, authorize later aggression, choose a covenantal identity, or refuse an opportunity to repent. If a defense explains why adults were wicked while never supplying an account of why a non-agent became a proper target, it has not answered the central case.

This is not an argument from sentiment alone. It is a test of how responsibility is assigned. Ordinary Christian moral discourse condemns punishing one person for another's wrongdoing, stresses the importance of intention, and treats protection of the vulnerable as morally salient. Ancient societies often distributed personhood and protection through hierarchies that modern readers should not project away; that historical fact clarifies the social world of the text but does not by itself vindicate its hierarchy (Lemos, 2017). The contemporary defender must therefore say whether the infant's lack of agency remains morally relevant and, if not, what replaces it.

The paper's target is conditional. It concerns Christians who affirm at least one of two claims:

- A1.** The biblical deity intentionally authorized the killing of Amalekite infants.
- A2.** Even if the language was not executed literally, the biblical deity could have authorized intentional infant killing without ceasing to be perfectly good.

A Christian who rejects both claims escapes the central argument. That reader may treat the passage as human misattribution, morally critical literature, stylized war rhetoric that does not authorize noncombatant killing, or a text whose authority does not require endorsing every narrated divine speech. Such positions have other interpretive burdens, but they do not need to call infant killing good. Morriston, Rauser, and Seibert develop

different routes toward questioning inerrancy or refusing straightforward identification of a disturbing portrayal with the divine character (Morrison, 2009; Rauser, 2009; Seibert, 2009).

The target is also narrower than every form of divine command theory. A divine command theory ordinarily explains at least some obligations through genuine divine commands; sophisticated versions do not simply equate goodness with arbitrary will. Adams ties obligation to commands arising within a broader account of the good, while Quinn and Hare offer developed accounts of command, requirement, and moral life (Adams, 1999; Hare, 2015; Quinn, 1978). The question here is epistemic as much as metaphysical: how can a human responsibly identify which apparent commands are genuine, and what role may the moral character of a command play in that identification?

Non-Agent Constraint

An explanation of population-wide judgment does not justify intentionally killing an infant unless it supplies a reason that applies to the infant without borrowing adult guilt, treating personhood as disposable property, or assuming the accepted authority's goodness in the very step meant to test it.

2. What History and Genre Can Resolve

Responsible criticism must distinguish four questions that apologetic discussion often blends:

1. What does the final form of 1 Samuel 15 represent Samuel as commanding?
2. What literary conventions shape its totalizing language?
3. What, if anything, occurred historically?
4. What may a contemporary Christian defend as morally good?

Ancient Israelite texts contain more than one ideology of war, and the ban belongs within a wider ancient Near Eastern literary and social world (Niditch, 1993). Comparative work on conquest accounts shows that totalizing victory language can be formulaic and rhetorically stylized rather than a photographic casualty report (Younger, 1990). Recent literary study likewise emphasizes that biblical writings can portray, organize, and criticize violence through several moral and cultural grammars (Lynch, 2020). Those findings caution against moving directly from a narrative sentence to a confident reconstruction of an event.

But historical caution cuts in both directions. Hyperbole can undercut a claim about what happened without automatically answering what the text commends or what the defender considers permissible. Three positions must remain separate:

- **Nonliteral and prohibitive:** the language is conventional, and intentional infant killing would be incompatible with the divine character. This position removes the paper's target.
- **Nonliteral but permissive:** the language was not carried out literally, but a literal command would have been good if genuinely divine. The historical claim recedes, while the counterfactual moral problem remains.
- **Literal and vindictory:** the command included infants, and the act was justified by judgment, authority, or hidden reasons. Both the textual and moral questions remain.

Copan and Flannagan marshal ancient-war rhetoric, broader narrative context, divine authority, and moral-government considerations in defense of Old Testament warfare (Copan & Flannagan, 2014). Their project deserves engagement rather than caricature. Yet no volume of historical context can alone establish the moral premise that an infant may intentionally be killed for adult or ancestral wrongdoing. Context may identify what an author meant, what an audience heard, or whether total destruction occurred. The moral conclusion still requires a bridge from those facts to justified targeting.

The distinction prevents two symmetrical errors. A critic should not insist that infants were historically killed after the defender has supplied adequate reason to reject literal execution. A defender should not invoke possible hyperbole as though it had already justified the literal act and then retain the claim that the same act would have been righteous. The first overstates history; the second uses historical uncertainty to evade a counterfactual that the theology still accepts.

3. The Direction of Moral Evaluation

3.1 Act-first and source-first judgment

In ordinary character assessment, conduct provides evidence about the agent. We ask what an actor intended, whom the act harmed, what alternatives were available, and whether the explanation fits standards applied elsewhere. A person represented as ordering the death of infants thereby acquires evidence against benevolence, even if further information might defeat that initial judgment.

A source-first procedure reverses the direction. The evaluator first identifies the actor as the perfectly good biblical deity and then classifies the conduct as good because a perfectly good deity performed or commanded it. Harm, non-agency, proportionality, and alternatives may still be discussed, but none may ultimately count against the protected identity. They must be reconciled with it.

This paper uses *God-concept* to mean a specified conception of a deity, including attributed powers, knowledge, character, purposes, and modes of revelation. The term matters because a generic appeal to *theism* cannot establish the identity or goodness of the particular biblical God-concept under examination. Nor does the bare label *God* identify which reported speech, text, interpreter, or tradition has reliable access to that deity.

Prior trust can rationally shape interpretation. If a reliable friend appears to act badly, one should seek context before abandoning the friendship. The same principle can apply to religious commitment. The problem begins only when trust is made infeasible or when interpretive charity is available to the accepted source but denied to structurally similar rivals. Different prior probabilities can justify different levels of resilience; they do not turn counterevidence into evidence or exemption merely by naming the preferred source.

3.2 The source-switch test

Consider a rival deity represented as omniscient, omnipotent, creator and sustainer of all life, perfectly good by the rival tradition's account, and author of a command with the same victims, purposes, alternatives, and promised afterlife. The deity's name and canonical location change; every stated justificatory feature remains fixed. Ask whether the command is compatible with perfect goodness.

If the answer changes only when the source label changes, the defender has not identified an act-relevant difference. The verdict is indexed to identity. If the answer remains the same, the defender has achieved consistency, but must then accept that the rival command is not disqualifying on moral grounds. The source-switch test does not assume that every deity has equal historical support. It isolates one narrower question: whether moral conduct is doing independent work in distinguishing the claimants.

Source-Invariance Principle

When two cases share every feature a defender says is morally relevant, changing only the protected authority's identity should not reverse the moral verdict. A reversal can be justified by unequal evidence for the sources, but then source evidence—not the conduct's moral profile—does the discriminating work.

This principle is procedural rather than metaphysically realist. It does not assert that there is one stance-independent moral fact everyone must detect. It asks a respondent to apply the respondent's own avowed

relevance conditions portably. If creator status, perfect knowledge, collective judgment, hidden reasons, or compensation justify the biblical case, stipulate them in the rival case. If they then fail, they were not the actual basis of the original verdict.

4. A Ledger of Defensive Costs

The principal defenses do not all fail in the same way. Some can be coherent, some can remove the target, and some create a dilemma rather than a contradiction. Table 1 records the safeguard each defense pressures and the question that keeps the analysis portable.

Defense	Claim	Safeguard under pressure	Portable question
Adult wickedness	Amalek's violence made population-wide judgment fitting.	Individual agency and non-agent protection.	What makes an infant answerable for adult acts?
Collective identity	Membership in the condemned people changes the child's status.	The boundary between group description and personal desert.	Would rival group membership transfer guilt in the same way?
Collateral harm	Infant deaths were tragic effects of a justified judgment.	Necessity and proportionality under unlimited power.	Which limitation prevented precise nonlethal alternatives?
Afterlife compensation	Blessed existence defeats or outweighs temporal harm.	The independent seriousness of killing and deprivation.	Would promised compensation justify the same human or rival command?
Creator ownership	The giver of life may take life through human agents.	Personhood against unlimited property rights.	Why does creation entail unrestricted disposal authority?
Hidden reasons	Perfect knowledge may contain reasons unavailable to humans.	Moral authentication and practical protection against false commands.	What apparent command could count against a claimant?
Divine command	Genuine authorship determines obligation or permission.	Conduct as an independent test of source goodness.	How is genuine authorship identified without using the verdict it settles?

Table 1: The defense-cost ledger. A row identifies a pressure and a test, not an automatic refutation of every sophisticated version of the defense.

4.1 Adult wickedness and collective identity

The pivot from infants to wicked adults supplies a possible rationale for judging adults. It does not transfer agency. A nation can persist across generations as a political or narrative identity, but a newborn does not acquire the intentions of an ancestor. If the defense instead treats collective membership itself as sufficient for lethal liability, it should say so directly. The moral cost is not hidden in ancient vocabulary: protection now depends on group status rather than personal action.

Collective responsibility need not always be incoherent. Institutions can bear duties, groups can benefit from injustice, and later members can inherit responsibilities of repair. But responsibility to repair is not interchangeable with desert for intentional killing. The infant remains the limiting case because no account of participation, negligence, or avoidable complicity is available.

4.2 Collateral harm and omnipotent alternatives

Human war creates tragic collisions among limited knowledge, limited power, urgency, and blunt means. An omniscient and omnipotent agent does not face those constraints. If the infants were not the intended targets, the defender must explain why unlimited power could not separate agents from non-agents, disable attackers, relocate dependents, or achieve the stated purpose without commanding human soldiers to kill children.

The point is not that a critic can know every divine reason. It is that *collateral* normally names harm produced by constraints on an agent's means. Remove the constraints and the analogy loses its ordinary explanation. An appeal to unknown reasons can still be made, but then the defense has moved from collateral necessity to skeptical trust.

4.3 Afterlife compensation

Compensation may change the total welfare of a victim without changing every fact about the act. Restoring a loss does not normally make an unauthorized killing permissible, and a promised benefit does not automatically license another agent to impose terror, deprivation, or death. If blessed afterlife is sufficient, the defender should ask whether a human or rival authority could use the same premise. Christians ordinarily reject a killer's claim that the victims are better off in heaven. The relevant difference must therefore be more than the existence of compensation.

The afterlife defense also threatens the value assigned to continued earthly life. If early killing is justified because it prevents future corruption or secures bliss, then survival can appear as the riskier state. A coherent theology may have resources to resist that implication, but those resources must explain why compensation counts in the biblical case without turning death into a generally permissible shortcut.

4.4 Ownership and creator rights

Creator status is morally relevant to gratitude, dependence, and jurisdiction on many theistic accounts. It does not follow without argument that creation entails unrestricted rights to dispose of persons or command third parties to kill them. Human makers do not gain unlimited authority over beings with interests merely because they caused those beings to exist. Divine creation is different in power and metaphysical dependence, but the inference from difference to unlimited lethal permission remains a substantive premise.

The source-switch test clarifies the options. If any stipulated creator-deity would possess the same right, the defense generalizes and the rival command is not disqualifying. If only the already accepted deity possesses it, the work is being done by prior identity. Either response may be coherent. Neither permits ownership to function simultaneously as a general reason and a source-specific exemption.

4.5 Hidden reasons and skeptical spread

Limited humans often lack relevant information. It is therefore rational to allow that an apparently wrong act might have a sufficient justification we cannot see. The defense becomes expansive when the same possibility neutralizes every apparent atrocity attributed to a perfect deity. If no moral profile can count against a claimant because sufficient reasons may always be hidden, moral appearances lose their role in authenticating revelation.

This is a recognized pressure on skeptical theism. Aikin and Ribeiro argue that appeals to divine commands do not straightforwardly rescue skeptical theism from moral skepticism, while Panchuk develops the related problem of distinguishing veridical commands from merely apparent commands endorsing cruelty (Aikin & Ribeiro, 2013; Panchuk, 2021). Danaher presses the epistemic accessibility and moral-risk problems for divine command theory (Danaher, 2019). More recently, Lee argues that a command-only response to skeptical moral reasoning threatens the evaluative role required for love (Lee, 2025).

These arguments do not show that hidden reasons are impossible. They identify *skeptical spread*: a strategy used to protect perfect goodness can also weaken the human ability to identify what a good deity would not command. The danger is practical as well as theoretical. A person facing an apparent command to harm a child needs a reason to classify it as false. If moral alarm is defeated merely because genuine commands would have adequate reasons, the classifier presupposes the authenticity it was meant to determine.

4.6 Modified divine command

Sophisticated divine command accounts often distinguish value from obligation and tie commands to a necessarily loving nature. This blocks the crude picture of arbitrary decrees. It also creates a useful constraint. If perfect love excludes some commands, then a text apparently attributing such a command can count against the attribution. If no possible command against non-agents could count because every genuine command must express love, the term *loving* ceases to discriminate among possible commands.

Koons argues that locating the standard in divine nature can leave the content of divine goodness insufficiently intelligible unless some properties explain why that nature is good (Koons, 2012). The Amalekite case turns that conceptual question into an epistemic one. Which features of compassion, justice, agency, and protection constrain the extension of divine goodness? If they are revised until intentional infant killing fits, then the nature standard has not independently tested the case.

5. Four Coherent Positions

The argument does not force one theological outcome. It distinguishes four positions and makes their costs visible.

Position	Treatment of the command	What it preserves	Principal cost
Scriptural fallibilism	The text misattributes, morally critiques, or imperfectly represents the divine will.	Non-agent protection and conduct as a test of revelation.	Strong inerrancy or direct-speech doctrines must be revised.
Independent-standard theism	Perfect goodness constrains possible commands; the attribution is rejected if it violates that constraint.	A substantive divine character and portable moral discrimination.	The standard is not exhausted by command alone.
Consistent voluntarism	Genuine divine identity fixes obligation or permission, including the hard case.	Metaphysical coherence and ultimate authority.	Conduct cannot independently disqualify a claimant once identity is granted.
Source-indexed preclearance	Ordinary standards condemn rivals but are reformulated when the accepted deity is implicated.	The accepted canon and the appearance of ordinary moral clarity.	The standard changes with protected identity and loses portability.

Table 2: Four positions available to the defender. The paper's central criticism targets source-indexed preclearance, not every position in the table.

The first two positions can preserve strong moral discernment by refusing the alleged authorization. Seibert's discerning approach to troubling portrayals and Morrision's challenge to inerrancy illustrate versions of that option, though they differ in theology and argument (Morrision, 2009; Seibert, 2009). The cost is doctrinal rather than logical: a theory of scripture or revelation must allow that a narrative divine-speech attribution can be morally mistaken, nonliteral in the relevant respect, or subordinate to a wider criterion.

Consistent voluntarism is more difficult for the critic to accuse of contradiction. If the defender states from the beginning that genuine divine authorship is the decisive moral fact, the verdict does not secretly change when the source is disclosed. The position can be disturbing to a humane critic without being procedurally inconsistent. Its cost is epistemic discrimination. The defender cannot cite the terrible character of a rival command as independent evidence that the rival is false while forbidding the same evidence from bearing on the accepted source. The dispute must instead be resolved through historical, revelatory, experiential, or other evidence for identity.

Source-indexed preclearance occupies the unstable middle. Before knowing the source, the defender may say that a perfectly good deity would never command infant killing. After learning that the accepted canon attributes such a command, the principle acquires qualifications: creator rights, unique history, hidden reasons, special judgment, or a broadened definition of love. Any qualification may be defensible. The diagnostic question is whether it was independently stated and whether it generalizes when the source changes.

This is why the paper speaks of a collapse of moral discernment rather than a proof of moral contradiction. The collapse occurs when conduct is advertised as evidence of divine character for favorable or rival cases but becomes incapable of lowering confidence in the protected case. Moral language still expresses approval, but it no longer independently distinguishes the authority from its acts.

6. Why Moral Non-Realism Does Not Silence the Critique

A common reply says that a critic who rejects objective moral facts cannot call the command objectively wrong. That reply would defeat an argument whose premise was stance-independent wrongness. It does not defeat the present internal and procedural argument.

A moral non-realist can hold pro-social commitments: protect children, attend to suffering, connect responsibility with agency, restrain concentrated power, and apply declared standards consistently. These commitments need not be cosmic objects in order to organize criticism and shared life. The paper asks whether a Christian defender's own standards travel across cases and whether evaluative language retains a stable human function.

Three levels should be separated:

1. **External condemnation:** the critic rejects intentional infant killing under a pro-social standard.
2. **Internal consistency:** the defender is asked whether the same stated reasons and differences receive the same weight across accepted and rival sources.
3. **Epistemic discrimination:** the defender is asked what conduct could count against an apparent revelation and how a false command would be identified.

Only the first depends on the critic's substantive values. The second concerns portability within the respondent's own rule. The third concerns whether the rule can distinguish authentic from false commands. A non-realist may therefore concede that consistent voluntarism is coherent while opposing it, and may still show that source-specific revision has replaced a purportedly general standard.

This restraint improves the argument. It avoids claiming that secular moral realism wins by default and prevents the paper from using outrage as a substitute for analysis. The humane pressure remains strong: a practice that cannot preserve the salience of infant non-agency once sacred identity appears has disabled a safeguard that many of its own adherents rely on everywhere else.

7. Objections and Replies

7.1 Divine and human agents are not relevantly alike

Correct. The argument does not infer from “humans may not kill infants” directly to “no deity may”. Creator status, knowledge, authority, and relation to life can be included in the source-switch case. The test changes only the source label after every declared relevant feature is matched. If those features justify both cases, consistency is restored. If they justify only the accepted deity, the defender must identify an additional difference rather than repeat the identity.

7.2 The rival lacks the biblical deity’s covenant history

Historical and covenantal location may matter. A rival case can be stipulated to contain an ancestral attack, long patience, a chosen people, a providential mission, and a canonical narrative. If the rival remains condemned because that history is false, the dispute concerns evidence for the histories. That is legitimate, but the moral profile no longer independently decides the case.

Nor does covenant history itself give an infant agency. It may explain why the text frames Amalek as an enduring enemy. It does not establish why a child is personally liable to intentional killing. Narrative continuity and moral desert are different relations.

7.3 No description available to humans can include every divine reason

True. The test need not claim exhaustive access. It asks which known or possible reasons the defender actually invokes and whether their generic form is extended to rivals. The defender may finally appeal to unknowable reasons. That position preserves logical possibility, but it weakens the claim that apparent cruelty can identify a false revelation. Unknown reasons cannot simultaneously neutralize accepted counterevidence and remain unavailable to rivals.

7.4 Prior evidence rationally protects a trusted revelation

Prior evidence should matter. A strong body of independent evidence can make one anomalous report less damaging than it would be in isolation. The paper does not demand equal priors or instant abandonment. It asks for the evidence and the possible update. How much would the command lower confidence? What would count as cumulative defeat? Would a rival with comparably strong prior evidence receive the same interpretive charity?

If the answer is that no possible conduct can lower confidence because the source is known analytically to be good, the position is not ordinary evidential trust. It is a protected identity claim. That may be a coherent faith commitment, but moral conduct is no longer serving as an independent test.

7.5 Ancient moral worlds should not be judged by modern individualism

Historical distance should produce interpretive humility, not automatic vindication. Ancient corporate identity, warfare, hierarchy, and personhood differ from modern assumptions; Niditch, Lemos, and Lynch help readers understand those differences (Lemos, 2017; Lynch, 2020; Niditch, 1993). Yet contemporary apologists are not merely reporting ancient norms. They are often defending the represented command as compatible with perfect goodness now.

The critic can acknowledge ancient categories and still ask whether group identity transfers lethal desert to a non-agent. Calling the question modern does not answer it. It identifies the location of the moral conflict.

7.6 The argument singles out Christians

It should not. A Muslim, Latter-day Saint, Hindu, political partisan, nationalist, or secular ideologue can protect an accepted authority by changing the rule after source disclosure. The source-switch test is portable. The

Christian case is focal because 1 Samuel 15:3 supplies an unusually clear non-agent victim and because Christian apologetics often presents perfect goodness and objective moral knowledge as evidence for the biblical deity.

A secular critic who excuses an allied state's violence while condemning an enemy's structurally similar violence commits the same procedural failure. Symmetry is not rhetorical generosity. It is part of the standard.

8. A Portable Audit of Moral Authority

The paper's constructive result is a short audit for any claimed exceptional command. It does not mechanically decide a case. It prevents the source's prestige from silently substituting for a reason.

Step	Question	Disciplined answer	Warning sign
1	Who is affected and what agency do they possess?	Victims are distinguished rather than absorbed into a guilty group.	Adult wrongdoing answers for infants or other non-agents.
2	Which facts are morally relevant?	Reasons are stated before the protected source controls the verdict.	New relevance criteria appear only after source disclosure.
3	What alternatives were available?	Power and knowledge increase expected precision and restraint.	Unlimited agency borrows the excuses of limited agents.
4	Does the reason travel?	The same reason has the same force for accepted and rival authorities.	Creator, mystery, or compensation works only for the home source.
5	What could disconfirm authenticity?	Some moral profile can lower confidence in an apparent command.	No command could count against an accepted revelation.
6	Which conclusion follows?	History, morality, and source identity are kept distinct.	Possible hyperbole is treated as moral vindication of literal killing.

Table 3: A portable moral-authority audit. Its purpose is to expose which premise carries the verdict and whether that premise remains stable when the source changes.

The audit places infants first because vulnerability and agency are easiest to lose in collective rhetoric. It then separates declared reasons from source identity, power from limitation, and interpretation from justification. A defender may pass the audit by rejecting the attribution, by supplying a reason that genuinely generalizes, or by openly adopting an authority-indexed ethics and accepting its consequences.

The audit also names the reader's practical obligation. Do not ask only whether a flexible theology can imagine a possible reason. Ask what rule would be used if the same command came from a rival deity, a charismatic leader, a private revelation, or a political authority. If no generalizable difference can be supplied, confidence should not be increased merely because the preferred source is implicated.

9. Conclusion

The Amalekite infant is not a decorative appeal to emotion. The infant is the point at which battle, adult guilt, repentance, and ordinary participation cease to answer the moral question. First Samuel 15 represents a command that includes children and infants and treats incomplete destruction as disobedience. Historical and literary study can complicate what happened, how totalizing language worked, and how the narrative should be read. It cannot by itself turn a non-agent into a culpable target.

For Christians who deny that the biblical deity did or could authorize intentional infant killing, the central pressure is removed. That route may require a fallibilist, nonliteral, or morally critical account of scripture, but it preserves a substantive constraint on divine goodness. For consistent voluntarists, genuine divine identity may settle the verdict. That route can be coherent, but it must concede that the command's apparent moral character cannot independently test the identity it presupposes.

The unstable position tries to retain both. It condemns a rival command through ordinary concern for agency and harm, then weakens those concerns when the accepted deity is implicated. Adult wickedness substitutes for infant agency; unlimited power borrows the language of collateral necessity; afterlife compensation discounts the act; ownership becomes disposal authority; and hidden reasons make apparent commands resistant to moral defeat. Each move may be formulated carefully, but each must answer the same portable question: would the reason retain its force if the deity's name changed?

The paper's conclusion is therefore bounded. It does not prove theism or Christianity false, establish the history of Amalek, require moral realism, or show that every Christian defense follows one pattern. It establishes a conditional incompatibility. A defender who affirms literal or counterfactual divine authorization of intentional infant killing cannot also use the conduct's ordinary moral profile as an independent test of divine goodness unless a relevant, source-invariant difference is supplied.

The requested intellectual change is simple. Keep the infant in view. State the rule before checking whom it condemns. Apply the same reasons to rival authorities. Permit moral evidence to lower confidence in an apparent revelation, or acknowledge openly that identity rather than conduct fixes the verdict. Anything less is not the vindication of moral discernment. It is retrospective authorization.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The central argument is a conditional incompatibility, not an inference from a disturbing text to the falsity of Christianity.

- P1.** A moral standard independently tests authority claims only if similar acts and reasons receive the same evaluation across sources, absent a stated and portable morally relevant difference.
- P2.** Intentional killing of non-agent infants is ordinarily treated by the target Christian audience as strong evidence against the goodness or authenticity of a human or rival divine commander.
- P3.** Defenses of 1 Samuel 15:3 appeal to adult or collective guilt, necessity, afterlife compensation, creator ownership, hidden reasons, divine nature, or genuine command.
- P4.** Each defense either (a) supplies a relevant reason that generalizes to a structurally equivalent rival, (b) denies that the biblical deity did or could issue the literal command, or (c) makes an already accepted divine identity decisive.
- P5.** Under option (a), the rival command is not independently disqualifying on the same moral ground; under option (b), the authorization is surrendered; under option (c), conduct no longer independently tests the source.

C. Therefore, a Christian defense affirming literal or counterfactual divine authorization of intentional infant killing cannot simultaneously preserve that authorization, condemn structurally equivalent rivals through ordinary moral judgment, and use conduct as an independent test of divine goodness without a relevant, portable difference. Otherwise, moral discernment becomes source-indexed retrospective authorization.

Scope. The conclusion does not establish that the narrated killing occurred, that every Christian accepts the authorization, that consistent voluntarism is contradictory, that Christianity is false, or that stance-independent moral facts exist. P2 must be demonstrated for a particular defender.

Validity. Given P1 and P4's exhaustive alternatives, P5 yields the bounded conclusion. Each route forfeits rival disqualification, retained authorization, or independent moral testing. The inference is deductively valid as a conditional incompatibility, not as a disproof of a religion.

Support. P1 defines independent discrimination; the source-switch test supplies the practice-sensitive evidence for P2. The surveyed literature supports P3, while P4–P5 classify the logical roles and costs of the defenses.

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