

# Evaluating *Providential Errancy Theory*: Does God Inspire Moral Errors in the Bible?

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## INTRODUCTION

Randal Rauser in his book *Jesus Loves the Canaanites: Biblical Genocide in the Light of Moral Intuition* invents a new theory of Biblical interpretation: *Providential Errancy Theory*. This theory posits that the driving concern in interpreting a Biblical text is not the context, language, discourse style, or worldview embedded in the narrative, but the “moral intuition and moral perception in theology and hermeneutics”<sup>1</sup> that the reader brings to the text. As he further asserts: “It behooves us as morally serious readers who seek to be like Christ to rebut seriously errant readings [of the Bible] and defend interpretations consistent with our moral intuitions and the theological and ethical ends for which we believe the text was revealed.”<sup>2</sup>

In applying his theory, Rauser attacks as inadequate all other interpretative approaches that defend God’s reasons for dispossessing the Promised Land from the Canaanites and argues that the Christian God could never have

made such a demand of Joshua and the Israelites.

This article will argue that *Providential Errancy Theory* is based on (1) an inadequate view of human moral intuition, (2) an inadequate view of human flourishing and (3) an inadequate hermeneutic. In the end, it will become apparent that *Providential Errancy Theory* has locked itself into a WEIRD (i.e., Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) worldview and undermined the possibility of ever approaching the mind of the original author of the Biblical text. This article will look at the effects *Providential Errancy Theory*, and finally, it will become apparent that Rauser is just recycling contemporary literary theory that theologian and philosopher Kevin Vanhoozer indicates is bound up with the modification or the outright rejection of orthodox Christian theology.<sup>3</sup>

## WHAT IS PROVIDENTIAL ERRANCY THEORY?

*Providential Errancy Theory* asserts there are moral errors attributed to God in the Bible and that an appropriate reading of the Biblical text is to wrestle with it in order to discover which texts affirm moral error and which ones are truthful about the character of God.<sup>4</sup> Morally serious readers who seek to be like Christ will assess those scriptures that conflict with their own moral intuitions and rebut these texts.<sup>5</sup> By doing so they will “read in the tradition of Israel” and “wrestle like Jacob” and assume the mantle of “Abraham, Moses, and the Psalmist.”<sup>6</sup> If one doesn’t find God’s intentional moral errors in the text one may actually be giving up the possibility to read the Bible in a manner that “makes us into God’s kind of dude.”<sup>7</sup>

Rauser applies *Providential Errancy Theory* to several texts that conflict with his own moral intuitions and views these texts as erroneously attributed to God because a loving God could not have said these things if he is to be accepted as a loving God. Texts attributed to God which conflict with Rauser’s own moral intuitions are discounted as ever being uttered by God but may still be considered as inspired by God. Why? Because God ensured these immoral, shocking statements are attributed to him in order to encourage an active, ethical reading of the Bible that will mature the moral character of the reader as the reader uncovers these morally errant attributions.<sup>8</sup>

**ASSESSING PROVIDENTIAL ERRANCY THEORY AND MORAL INTUITION*****Does “What is true” mean the same as “What is true for me”?***

Rausser unfortunately falls into several traps. The first mistake is understanding truth as “what is true for me” instead of “what is true.” Any statement in the Bible attributed to God but which conflicts with Rausser’s own moral intuitions is understood as being in error. By making his culturally and politically conditioned morality the primary arbiter of Biblical meaning, he unfortunately presumes that all those who disagree with him are morally errant.

The best explanation for Rausser presuming his moral intuitions are reflective of everyone’s moral intuitions and thereby inerrant is to press them up against Haidt’s moral reasoning categories.<sup>9</sup> It quickly becomes apparent that Rausser’s own moral reasoning is culturally conditioned and reflects the standard traditional liberal mindset that uses just two instead of the total five moral intuitions in moral reasoning.<sup>10</sup> Rausser’s arguments are firmly rooted in the (1) care/harm and (2) fairness/cheating paradigm but largely leaves out three other moral intuitions that traditional conservatives and non-Western peoples also factor into their reasoning: (3) loyalty/betrayal, (4) authority/subversion and (5) sanctity/degradation. As such, Haidt would affirm Rausser’s moral intuition theory drives his subconscious attacks on all those who disagree with him, specifically those who draw from all five moral intuitions and why he may be asserting his own moral intuition as “what is true for me must be true for everyone including what is true in the Bible.”

***What moral intuitions are adequate to adjudicate god moral intentions?***

Traditional Evangelicals submit themselves to the authority of Scripture, but for Rausser this is not a sign of piety but “a failure to seek a more holistic, honest and potentially transformative engagement” with the text.<sup>11</sup> This tendency to downplay the authority of the text vis-à-vis my authority over the text is in keeping with what Haidt perceives as tendencies rooted in liberal WEIRD societies<sup>12</sup> where individualism is the driving cultural paradigm. These worldviews prioritize harm-inflicting violations of morality vis-a-vis those who also factor in the (1) authority to the text, (2) loyalty to the text and (3) the sanctity of the text as part of their natural moral intuition.

Jews in the Old Testament (OT) never viewed these texts as mirroring God’s moral errors, but affirmed the authority of God communicating these

texts. This can be seen in how they understood their history, where God’s command to dispossess the Canaanites is integrated into their liturgy (see Psalm 106). Their understanding was that their ancestors were condemned by God to the desert for forty years because they engaged in child sacrifice. Based on this legal precedent, it is logical to assume their moral intuitions were such that they had no qualms in dispossessing the Canaanites from the land because God hated child sacrifice to demons and that his covenant love to his people demands obedience to his word and his moral standards.

***What informs my moral intuitions regarding my loyalty to a text?***

Rausser fails to understand the moral underpinning of what it means to be loyal to the text. Those Biblical scholars whose moral intuition includes Haidt’s loyalty/betrayal categories, sense they may be guilty of being treasonous to the author of the text when they accuse God of intentionally putting moral errors in the text to encourage a wrestling with the text. This loyalty to the text of evangelical exegetes is not that different from the loyalty the early Israelites who presumed God intended, specifically as it relates to the dispossessing of the Canaanites from the land because of God’s abhorrence towards those who engaged in child sacrifice.<sup>13</sup>

***What informs my moral intuition regarding the sanctity to the text?***

If I view the text as coming from a holy and perfect communicator who challenges all humanity to also live a holy life, and that those who fall short of his perfect standards are subject to judgement, then it becomes very plausible to affirm that such a God has the right to not only hold me accountable for my sin, but anyone else as well. If my moral intuition asserts that God’s holy demands on all of humanity gives him the right to exercise either judgement or grace because all have sinned,<sup>14</sup> then it is plausible that he also may judge those peoples who revolt against him and his justice.

***What informs my moral intuitions regarding care vs harm?***

John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth century British philosopher who taught that, “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others” appears to be the driving paradigm of *Providential Errancy Theory*. Since God appears to be affirming harm to all those in a Canaan, God must

be engaging in an immoral action and therefore God could not have communicated this action to Joshua and the Israelites. Logically, these texts should therefore be treated as a moral error in the Bible, proving *Providential Errancy Theory*.

Is the problem of the Canaanite dispossession mandate a violation of Mill's ethic that we "do no harm under any circumstances"? Is enshrining Phoenician infanticide causing harm? The resounding answer "yes." It hurt the babies,<sup>15</sup> the mothers who felt culturally pressured to give their babies to Canaanite priests to be sacrificed, destroyed the emotional make-up of fathers who loved their children, and undermined the loving structure necessary for any nation to adequately flourish.

To assert therefore that God could not have judged these nations who may have been like most other Neolithic and paleolithic cultures known to be capable of killing up to fifty percent of their children and engage in cannibalism<sup>16</sup> is to actually condone the killing of babies as a higher good than the divine judgement meant to stop this heinous crime.

## ASSESSING PROVIDENTIAL ERRANCY THEORY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

### *How do we understand human flourishing?*

From a theological standpoint we need to ask how the Bible views human flourishing. Does God abhor cultural practices that drive people to sacrifice their children to idols and demons? Are there over-riding issues that embody God's choice of Israel as his redemptive vehicle to inhabit his specific sacred space in order to embody his desire to bless all the nations of the world, and can we understand God's judgements in the light of how he interprets human flourishing?

It is impossible to understand biblical flourishing without a biblical theology of salvation. Worldview studies among preliterate peoples have proven that western missionaries often misunderstand the scope of biblical salvation as limited to a change of allegiance to a new God. This however, is very much at odds with most non-western Christian societies which operate from a worldview that incorporates earthly gods, sages, spirits, demons, ancestors, astrology, divinations etc.<sup>17</sup> If we look at the Pentateuch and its prohibitions against divination and astrology (Lev 19:31; 20:27) we can see that God's

view of human flourishing is more non-Western. God intended for his people to devote themselves strictly to him and turn their back on all other supernatural powers. It was not just the embrace of God, but he insisted on the exorcism of all other supernatural powers from influencing their daily lives. When a wholehearted devotion to Yahweh is absent, salvation is absent and the road to human flourishing is blocked.

The Israelite nation was chosen by God to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:6). Their call was not defined by "do no harm and be fair" but embodied a missional call that included the nations around them. This call was rooted in a specific space, a holy land (Lev 27:21; Zech 2:112) or "Promised Land" (Gen 26:3) and a specific time period (Gen 28:13). If God chose Israel for this purpose, and the land of Canaan as the space from which this new holy priesthood would be launched, then we need to ask ourselves if it is plausible that God would ask his chosen society to make a concerted effort to dispossess infanticide practicing peoples from the sacred space he had set aside to reach the world with his message of redemptive love?<sup>18</sup>

The corrosive influence of the Canaanites on the Israelites became before the Israelites moved into Canaan. While still wandering in the desert, Israelite morality was already being eroded as they began sacrificing their sons and daughters to the idols and demons of Canaan.<sup>19</sup> In this context God chose to excise the cancer by refusing his own people *en masse* to enter into the land and imprisoning them in the desert for forty years. It should therefore not surprise us that he would also punish the very Canaanites who had corrupted his people in the desert.

What if God was ensuring that his ultimate representation of salvific love, his only Son, could enter this world in order to redeem it from practices like those enshrined in the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice? What if, in his omniscience, God knew that dispossession of the Canaanites was imperative to the salvation of the world by ensuring his people didn't get absorbed culturally and religiously into the people groups existing in the land?

### *Human flourishing and holiness*

Israelite moral intuitions drew from God's revelation to his people, which all five of Haidt's moral intuitions ultimately borrow from. As such their primary concern was more than just avoiding harm and encouraging fairness. They

had seen all their parents die in the dessert because God deemed them too impure to possess the Promised Land. They had witnessed that those who chose to go against God's authority and refuse to obey him, end up dead in the dessert or, in the case of the Egyptians, dead at the bottom of the Red Sea.

If God deemed his own chosen people as too impure to possess his sacred space, and judged them to forty years in the desert, is it not plausible to assume that the concept of sanctity is pivotal in what God wants us to include in our moral intuition? That those chosen to live in his promised land and carry his message of salvation to all the other nations of the world were also charged with living to a higher moral standard? And since the Canaanites detested this level of holiness and enshrined infanticide in God's chosen sacred space, is it not plausible to affirm that God may have given the command to dispossess the Canaanites from the land to ensure all the nations of the world would be blessed by him in the future?

### ***Human flourishing and loving hope***

A pivotal drive for societies to flourish is hope, and the morality behind *Providential Errancy Theory* is devoid of hope. Doing no harm presents no hope. Hope, in the Canaanite societies that practiced infanticide, was not the hope embodied in a loving God that formed loving relationships with his people. Canaanite gods who demanded the regular sacrifice of infants were capricious and devoid of love. In order to ensure his message of loving hope was preserved, God first refused a generation entrance the promised land who sacrificed their children to "Canaanite demons, (Ps 106:40) and then secondly dispossessed those who prioritized death instead of hope.

### **THE HERMENEUTICAL SIDE EFFECTS OF PROVIDENTIAL ERRANCY THEORY**

***The Bible becomes a litany of God's moral errors needing to be discovered.*** *Providential Errancy Theory* reduces much of the Bible to a tale of God's morally erroneous assertions that he mischievously put in the text to play the devil's advocate in order to sharpen our ethical understanding of what he might actually deem as morally good. We are left wondering if God's affirmations that he flooded the world and only saved Noah and his family because he was grieved at humanity's rampant sinfulness (Gen 6:5) is true because

it conflicts with what I might do in the light of rampant human sinfulness? Perhaps, as *Providential Error Theory* would assert, this story is nothing more than a teaching tool to check our moral critical thinking abilities?

And what about the idea of Jesus saying, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" to those who affirm his lordship and yet refuse to help the poor, hungry and fatherless? Is this attributed to Jesus in error because I could not imagine sending anyone to hell no matter how evil they were? Perhaps this is also one of God's trick questions to nurture our morality!

And what about substitutionary atonement? Since I, in my fallen moral nature, would have trouble allowing my son to die for someone else's sin, I must be mistaken that God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son to rescue people from eternally perishing? And then there is Sodom and Gomorrah, Pharaoh drowning in the sea, the thousands of Assyrians who were struck dead when they wanted to annihilate the Israelites under Hezekiah's reign etc. It seems absurd all these narratives are a litany of God's morally erroneous inspirations meant to deepen our moral critical thinking skills.

### ***The standard of God's holiness becomes subservient to our sinful moral intuitions.***

God's moral intuition is not synonymous with the moral intuition of fallen humanity. God is angry when he sees thousands of children sacrificed to demonic Canaanite fertility deities. He has no intention to dote on the perpetrators like a loving mother, refusing to exercise justice on a nation addicted to infanticide. God's only option to infanticide is not just the affirmation of the moral goodness of the Canaanite killers who love the flesh of babies, but his holy standard is his perfect holy nature, by which he judges all other moral beings. The problem with *Providential Errancy Theory* is that our fallen, immoral intuition, devoid of God's abhorrence to sin, makes us unable to understand God repugnance to such heinous crimes. God acted because he is holy, just and loving. To presume my human reasoning, rooted in my sinful, human nature actually mirrors the reasoning of a holy God is to stretch the validity of fallen human morality beyond what it was intended.

***The meaning of the text is severed from the global church due to modern cultural arrogance.***

The weakness in *Providential Errancy Theory* is that it prioritizes the sinful and often immoral human nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century cultures (influenced by what has been called WEIRD<sup>20</sup>) in understanding the Bible at the expense of the trinitarian God working through the global church by his Spirit across millennia. While different interpretations of texts may be rooted in different historical church traditions, to explicitly affirm an interpretive theory that centralizes one theologian's intuitions over the large majority of Biblical scholars who have commented on these passages throughout the history of the church is simply arrogant. And when one's interpretation of Scripture severs itself from the standard hermeneutic of the church, the very place where the Holy Spirit has chosen to work, and replaces this with a hermeneutic centralized in one autonomous person and their sinful morality, we lose the larger checks and balances of what a text can or cannot say.

***Orthodoxy becomes subservient to post-modern literary theory.***

Rausser's post-modern literary theory prioritizes themes of "struggle" and "reading the text from the margins" instead of a more orthodox approach. By viewing the text as nothing but a composite of indeterminate forces trying to influence the communicative event (such as the Israelite's trying to put their political theory/spin into the text), the transcendent ground of meaning is lost. Statements attributed to God in the text end up as nothing more than human projections of the "will to power" by the Israelites. If we intentionally limit our reading of the text from "the margins" or the "wrestling mat," we end up reading our own politically theory into the text. In the end we shut off the possibility of any genuine contact with God through the biblical text. We are left to the confines of our "human intuitions," "our quest for liberation," or a book where God providentially communicates moral errors. In Rausser's hermeneutic, the author (God) is affirming counter-theological notions of morality, which in this case, is the elevation of culturally conditioned moral intent as the final arbiter of meaning. The readers have become the writers and the place of an accepted orthodoxy has been replaced by the mores of the individual reader.

***The Holy Spirit's ability to bridge authorial Intent and reader understanding is severed.***

Probably the greatest hermeneutical concern in *Providential Errancy Theory* is that it makes the hermeneutical distance between us as readers of the text and the author of the text so large that we can't really say anything about God. If we look at the text and surmise that God may have intentionally inspired errors about himself in the text in order to encourage us to "wrestle with the text," a cascade of dominoes begins to fall. Can I trust anything God says in the text? Is he perhaps a liar or intentionally misdirecting me? Perhaps God meant to say certain things about himself but he was unable to adequately inspire the human authors to clearly say those things and so they misprinted things about him, which he now hopes to inspire as people struggle with his erroneous communication. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is really not eternal? If the Holy Spirit is eternal, he has the ability to span time and ensure the human author and the human reader are both inspired. This allows God to ensure adequate communication takes place between his intended communication and intended understanding. The faith that gains understanding, is the faith that follows the Word. Indeed, we could perhaps define faith as the ability to follow the word.<sup>21</sup>

**CONCLUSION: REAFFIRMING A TRINITARIAN HERMENEUTIC**

To deny that God speaks the words ascribed to him (like dispossessing the land of the Canaanites), is to reject one of the most basic tenets of any theistic faith: that God can communicate locutions to other beings made in his image. It denies that when he created a universe, he structured it with order to ensure he would be understood by those created in his image. Therefore, to deny words to God in Scripture meant to be understood by us, when the text and the historic, orthodox church tradition have always ascribed these commands, promises, warnings or encouragements to him, undermines the very essence of God's ability to verbally implant ideas, thoughts and discourse in the minds of people. It undermines God's ability to ensure his word is adequately communicated in an understandable way to other people throughout history. This belief is the backbone of theistic communicative theory.

The answer to this dilemma has been the church's longstanding trinitarian approach to the text that ensures the text can be understood, specifically as mediated by the role of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, by infilling the believer and by working through the self-correcting processes in the church, provides the conditions and power to ensure that God's message does not return empty (Isa 55:11). As humans created in the image of God, we are endowed with the faculties to understand God's communication and while our interpretations may be imperfect due to fallenness, God did not leave those in the church in a position where his communication is best understood as "morally erroneous." God's Spirit accompanies the authorial intent, the transmission process to the writers, and the interpretive process whereby the community of believers can approximate and understand the text. We must therefore be careful when a new and novel understanding of God emerges that affirms he intentionally communicates immoral ideas in the bible, just to make us wrestle with the text.

Rausser's four presuppositions unfortunately are at odds with orthodox Christian theology because: (1) his hermeneutic largely leaves out the role of the Spirit, (2) his presuppositions are more characteristic of postmodern literary theory than a trinitarian hermeneutic, (3) his vague post-modern notion of "love" as understood as "do no harm" is also inadequate when understood by the more robust understandings produced by theologians over the centuries and (4) his understanding of moral intuition is clouded by his embrace of current cultural viewpoints.

We need to be careful that we don't make our 21<sup>st</sup> century distorted social imaginaries and worldviews the standard by which we think what God can and cannot say. Idols are the projections of humanity's will to power, and Rausser's idol asks us to center our gaze on fallen human moral intuition instead of a holy, loving and just God. As Vanhoozer aptly states, "Readers treat the text as an idol whenever they see in it only what they themselves have produced. What the idol images is ultimately its maker—its reader-god. The idol thus acts as a mirror, not as a portrait."<sup>22</sup> In the end, what Rausser leaves us with is a text reflecting our sinful selves, our struggles with the true and living God who is holy and our immorality. God is no longer eternally truthful, but now intentionally posits moral, historical and scientific errors in the text for no greater purpose than to have us struggle. In this scenario, where is the "Blessed Hope" of the Gospel and the truth of Scripture?

The ultimate danger of *Providential Errancy Theory* is that it is coated with postmodern deconstructive pride. And while genocide texts are difficult to understand, our humility to the one who communicated the text should be such that we never elevate our own sinful morality as the ultimate judge, and place God under our judgment as we pronounce him guilty of intentionally inspiring moral errors in the Bible. As Mark Taylor aptly reminds us of our natural quest for power: "The deconstruction of the Western theological network discloses the recurrent effort of human beings to achieve a position of domination."<sup>23</sup> We need to be careful that as readers of the text, we do not elevate our own voice into the ultimate position of domination. In humility, it would be better if we cried with Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Rom 11:33).

<sup>1</sup> Randal Rausser, *Jesus Loves Canaanites: Biblical Genocide in the Light of Moral Intuition* (Edmonton: 2 Cup Press, 2021), 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in this Text* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 457.

<sup>4</sup> Rausser, *Jesus Loves Canaanites*, 280.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>9</sup> Jess Graham, Jonathan Haidt, Brian A. Nosek, "Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. American Psychological Association. 96 (5): 1029–46.

<sup>10</sup> Graham, Haidt, Nosek, "Liberals and Conservatives," 1029–46.

<sup>11</sup> Rausser, *Jesus Loves Canaanites*, 281.

<sup>12</sup> See Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, Ara Norenzayan, "The weirdest people in the world?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Volume 33, Issue 2-3, June 2010: 61 – 83.

<sup>13</sup> See Psalm 106 in which dispossessing the Canaanites is attributed to God's anger at their child sacrifice. James 4:12; Rom 3:23.

<sup>14</sup> Lev 20:2-5 clearly points out that sacrifice of children to Molech was happening before the people entered the land of Canaan.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph B. Birdsell, (1986). "Some predictions for the Pleistocene based on equilibrium systems among recent hunter gatherers" in *Man the Hunter* (ed. Richard Lee & Irven DeVore; Chicago: Aldine, 1969). 239.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 49.

<sup>17</sup> Remember, all the Israelites themselves (with the exception of Caleb and Joshua) were also condemned to death in the desert when they refused to follow God's command into the Promised Land. Disobeying God's authority carried heavy penalties for the Israelites.

<sup>18</sup> Psalm 106:37, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic.

<sup>20</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text*, 437.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 459.

<sup>22</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 15.