

Cardinal Sins

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen

**A Moral Reckoning:
The Role of the Catholic Church
in the Holocaust and Its
Unfulfilled Duty of Repair**

Alfred A. Knopf, 362 pages.

Reviewed by Robert S. Wistrich

Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a rash of new books on Catholic-Jewish relations, especially on the role of Pope Pius XII and the Vatican during the Holocaust. Most of these works were written by Catholic critics like the British journalist John Cornwell, the Italian historian Giovanni Miccoli, and American scholars such as Susan Zuccotti, Michael Phayer, and James Carroll. They have exposed with implacable analytical rigor and moral passion the sins of commission and omission that can be laid at the door of the Catholic Church for its behavior towards the Jews during World War II.

In his controversial new work, *A Moral Reckoning*, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's treatment of Church anti-Semitism relies largely on secondary literature, especially on these recent works. But his indictment is more sweeping and comprehensive than most of his predecessors', slamming not only the anti-Semitic beliefs and "silence" of Pius XII during the Holocaust, but the entire history of the Church. According to his account, the Catholic Church has been the primary purveyor of anti-Semitism in the world for the past two millennia, a sin which began with the Christian Bible itself and continues up to the present day.

In particular he draws our attention to "the Christian Bible's assault on the Jews," the damaging anti-Semitic content of so much material which can be found in this sacred text, which Christians regard as the infallible word of God. The underlying structure of the New Testament narratives, he asserts, is intrinsically defamatory and libelous, since it presents Jews as the "ontological enemy of

Jesus and God.” Goldhagen rightly points out the devastating consequences of false accusations in the New Testament which attribute “noxious qualities and malfesance” to the Jews, presenting them as Christ-killers and the offspring of Satan. One of his demands for moral reparation by the Church is that such libelous and “hate-inducing passages about Jews” be expurgated. At the very least, he suggests, every Christian Bible should contain a running commentary correcting the texts’ erroneous assertions, and including disclaimers regarding its many anti-Semitic passages.

However, Goldhagen’s account of two millennia of Christian anti-Semitism scarcely breaks new ground. We are reminded how the medieval Crusaders put entire Jewish communities to the sword, and how the Church forbade Jews to marry Christians and to enter key professions, and how it restricted them to cramped ghettos. As is well known from decades of scholarship, the Church continually sought to restrict and isolate Jews from Christian society—that is, when it could not convert them. It did this through its bigoted preaching, incitement, and encouragement of anti-Jewish legislation.

All this is perfectly true. But Goldhagen goes further. For him, this policy constitutes “eliminationist”

anti-Semitism, a form of social and religious “elimination” rather than physical killing. He does not, however, explain why the Catholic Church, if it was truly “eliminationist” in its Jew-hatred, did not advance towards a “final solution” at the very peak of its power and influence in the Middle Ages. In effect, he suggests a linear progression from Catholic anti-Semitism to the Third Reich, which lacks any adequate feel for historical nuance.

The book is also on questionable ground in asserting that Catholic and Nazi anti-Semitism in the 1930s were identical—for example, in their linkage of Jews with Communism as *the* godless threat to the survival of the Church. Certainly, there were Catholics throughout Europe who were seduced by the Nazi onslaught against Bolshevism, “materialism,” liberalism, and the “Jewish spirit.” But the Catholic war against the Jews (despicable though it often was) cannot be equated with Nazism, any more than National Socialism itself should be described as a Christian phenomenon or reduced to the category of an updated spawn of earlier Catholic teaching. The cross begat the swastika only in the very broad sense that Nazi anti-Semitism would never have taken hold in German or European consciousness without the millennial hatred

originally instilled by Christianity. To say this is not the same as implying that Auschwitz was somehow pre-programmed in Christian theological doctrine.

Furthermore, in his overeagerness to establish a direct link between Catholic and Nazi anti-Semitism, the author virtually ignores the harsh anti-Christian ideology of the Third Reich's leadership. Their hatred of Jews was explicitly racist, not Christian, directed at Jews as "sub-humans," vermin, and bacilli, not at "Christ-killers." Pseudo-scientific, anti-Christian racism and the Nazi belief in the "Aryan" myth were constantly inculcated into the SS, the Hitler Youth, and other sectors of German society, among other things with the clear intent of weakening the hold of the Christian churches.

Moreover, Nazi ideology and totalitarian praxis in the Reich consistently rejected the escape route of conversion offered by Christianity. Instead, it sent baptized Jews to the death camps with the same ruthlessness with which it sent their former co-religionists. These were not incidental or minor differences but reflected a fundamental chasm between Christianity and Nazism, which, tragically enough, the churches failed to maintain during the 1930s and the

Holocaust years. This theoretical gulf should not be denied because of the Church's moral collapse during the war; rather, it should be underscored.

Goldhagen also oversimplifies the larger picture by suggesting that the Jesuit periodical *Civiltà Cattolica* (a semi-official mouthpiece of the Vatican at the time) was little better in its crude anti-Semitism than *Der Sturmer*. Other historians—including David Kertzer and Susan Zuccotti—have already pointed to the racist libels against the Jews in this Jesuit publication. This is already a terrible enough stain on the Church. But what is gained by superficially comparing *Civiltà Cattolica* with Julius Streicher's abominations?

Goldhagen's implacable indictment of Christianity is also too exclusively focused on the sins of the *Catholic* Church. In Germany, for example, which was two-thirds Lutheran, Protestant regions voted far more massively for the Nazis than did Catholic regions. One-third of German Protestant believers joined the thoroughly Nazified Deutsche Christen (German Christians), a movement which combined anti-Semitic race doctrines with the Gospel. Nothing comparable happened with the Catholics in Germany. Nor does it make sense to contrast the admirable record of Danish Lutherans during the war with Catholic failings,

unless one seriously addresses the massive surrender of German Lutherans to Nazism in the heartland of the “final solution.” In fact, Goldhagen never explains why Lutheranism could help to produce a virulent, Nazi-style anti-Semitism in Germany while saving Jewish lives in Denmark. Nor does he evoke the record of Orthodox Christians in the East, especially in Russia and Romania, where they played a major part in disseminating the most vicious forms of anti-Semitism before the Holocaust. “Holy Russia” was, after all, the worst persecutor of Jews before 1918, its violence and cruelty dwarfing that of papal Rome.

The book’s black-and-white treatment of Pius XII (Eugenio Pacelli) also leaves much to be desired. Goldhagen is far too ready to swallow Cornwell’s dubious argument that Pacelli was a convinced anti-Semite from at least 1919; that he was “more a collaborator” (like Petain or Quisling) than a victim of Nazism; and that he was a cynical opportunist who retrospectively painted himself as an ally of the Jews after 1945. The reality was far more complex than that. Nor was Pius XII’s “silence” about Jews as absolute as one might imagine from reading this book. Even if it was clearly belated and inadequate, Pius XII’s intervention in Hungary in 1944 did help to save Jewish lives in Budapest,

and Susan Zuccotti’s debunking of Vatican claims to have assisted Italian Jews, on which Goldhagen heavily relies, is not necessarily the last word on the subject.

Nevertheless, there is a great deal to agree with in Goldhagen’s strictures about the “moral blackout” created by Pius XII’s defenders when they avoid any serious discussion of the Vatican’s anti-Semitism before the Holocaust. Indeed, Goldhagen is at his polemical best when unmasking the various “exculpatory strategies” used by Catholic apologists. He is particularly effective in demolishing spurious arguments like the claim that had Pius XII spoken out, Jews would have suffered even more; or that Nazi anti-Semitism had *nothing at all* to do with its Christian precedents; or that popes and Church leaders, in their role as diplomats, cannot be held to the high ethical standards of justice and love which they profess.

This last point brings me to the more original part of this hard-hitting book, where the author rightly insists on holding the Catholic Church responsible for its inexcusable complicity in the Holocaust. The Church’s moral responsibility to the Jews in the post-Holocaust era should include concern for the well-being and political security of the Jews in Israel. Hence Goldhagen is fully justified in noting

the inordinate amount of time it took (almost fifty years) until the Vatican finally recognized the Jewish state, and he is on firm ground in deploring the present pope's failure to respond adequately to Bashar al-Assad's anti-Semitic diatribes during the papal visit to Damascus in May 2001. Equally, one can sympathize with his call for the systematic eradication of anti-Semitism in the Christian heritage, for greater truth telling, and for an end to the obfuscation apparent in Vatican documents like "We Remember" (1998).

Goldhagen tends to downplay the great changes that have taken place in Roman Catholic theological attitudes towards Jews and Judaism in recent decades. Some critics have complained that he does not do justice to the efforts of Pope John XXIII or to those of the incumbent of St. Peter's Chair, Pope John Paul II, who has actively promoted Christian-Jewish dialogue. There is some truth to such objections, yet Goldhagen's indictment still seems broadly valid, if at times overstated.

Certainly, the soul-searching that we have thus far seen from the highest levels of the Church—the apologies, expressions of goodwill, conciliatory language, and generalized contrition—is most welcome. But as my experience with the Vatican's refusal to open key archives relating to the Holocaust

indicates, a great deal still needs to be done. In 1999, I was invited to take part in a six-member international Catholic-Jewish commission that was created to examine the Vatican's wartime record, with the official blessing (initially, at least) of the pope. This was an illuminating, if at times bruising, experience, which ended with the resignation of the commission in October 2001, in protest at the Vatican's refusal to permit proper access to relevant archives and documents. Even when explicitly confronting the past, it seems, the Catholic Church lacks the vigor and humility necessary for the truth to emerge.

What sort of change, then, is to be asked of the Church? Some of Goldhagen's suggestions in this regard seem perfectly reasonable. For example, he is surely right about the need for the Church to do more to correct the "relentless and withering assault on Jews and Judaism" in the New Testament. So, too, the Catholic authorities should name names, explicitly repudiating leaders—popes, bishops, and priests—who failed to act according to the Church's own standards of justice, charity, and goodness before or during the Holocaust. The Catholic Church should also modify its age-old tradition of *realpolitik* and more thoroughly revise its catechism to purge it of any teaching

that still smacks of anti-Semitism. I doubt, however, that Goldhagen's other proposals—that the Church abandon papal infallibility, embrace religious pluralism, or actually rewrite the Christian Bible—while highly desirable in themselves, are at all practicable. It is one thing to demand a reform-oriented overhaul of the “structures of deceit” (as Gary Wills called them), a turning away from authoritarian traditions and repudiation of a horrific anti-Semitic legacy, and another matter entirely to expect Catholics to take an axe to the very core of their faith. Although Goldhagen does not frame his demand for change in explicitly revolutionary terms, it would surely mean the end of Catholicism as it has been historically understood. This would be fiercely resisted and surely defeated.

Such naivete does not detract from the force of Goldhagen's book as a passionate moral challenge to the Church. Nevertheless, *A Moral Reckoning* seems curiously out of tune with the predominant thrust of global anti-Semitism today, which mainly comes not from a declining Catholicism, but from a renascent Islam, the anti-globalist Left, populist anti-Americanism in Europe, and the *ressentiment* of Western intellectuals who seize on the Palestinian cause to cover up their own moral shallowness. In this context, any attempt to draw a connection between

anti-Semitism and Goldhagen's depiction of the Catholic Church as a reactionary holdout against liberal modernity seems too facile and “politically correct.”

Is it really true, for example, that a major injection of democratic pluralism would be enough to free the Church from the incubus of religious triumphalism and Jew-hatred? After all, it was a decidedly old-fashioned pope, John XXIII, who in the 1960s initiated the first rapprochement with the Jewish people; it was another “anti-modern” and in some ways “anti-democratic” pontiff, John Paul II, who continued on this path, despite a number of setbacks in recent years. Nor, for that matter, does the fact that many Catholics still cling to an outdated notion of “absolute truth” preclude a new respect for Jews. Conservatives no less than liberals in the Catholic Church freely acknowledge today the importance of Christianity's Hebrew roots, the inner connection between the Old and the New Testaments, and the debt that Catholicism owes to its “elder brother.”

Certainly, we still do not have a total “moral reckoning” concerning the Holocaust and Christian responsibility for it, and perhaps we never will. Nevertheless, Catholic anti-Semitism is beginning to wither away as a result of education and the changes of the past forty years. At the same

time, more virulent strains of the “longest hatred” are acquiring renewed life. If Catholics and Jews could find some common ground in fighting this “new anti-Semitism” together—directed primarily at Israel’s very existence—it would do much to heal the tragic scar on the history of Christianity, depicted in this and other recent books on the subject. This would surely be the most significant

contemporary form of moral reparation by Catholics, and a real contribution to mending the world that was devastated by the Holocaust.

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The Philosopher’s Bible

Leon R. Kass

**The Beginning of Wisdom:
Reading Genesis**

Free Press, 700 pages.

Reviewed by Benjamin Balint

Each of the innumerable commentaries and glosses and marginalia on the Bible—no text has pulled around itself so many concentric layers of reading—addresses itself in some way to the question: How is this book of books to be read, or (what

amounts to the same thing) what is the biblical text?

Leon R. Kass, who heads the President’s Council on Bioethics and describes himself as a “man of medicine, raised in a strictly secular home without contact with Scripture,” is not the likeliest of biblical commentators. Indeed, his ambitious 700-page work, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*, the product of a seminar he has taught for twenty years at the University of Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought, owes its many surprising turns to the perspective of a

brilliant outsider—or at least late-comer—who honed his impressive skills not on midrash, but on the Great Books. So it is only natural that Kass prefaces his own exegesis by clearing away the brush of existing orthodoxies and telling us how the Bible, first of all, ought *not* to be read.

To begin with, Kass has no patience for politicized academics who study the Bible “under the influence of, say, Marxist or feminist or environmentalist ideologies, [and] attack its apparent teachings as racist, sexist, and anthropocentric.” He laments the way modern Bible scholars have been “interested less in the meaning and more in the sources of the text,” and as a result “have seen the Hebrew Bible not as a unified whole but as an aggregate of separate documents derived from diverse sources.” Though Kass is not afraid to make reference to biblical scholarship when necessary, his lucid and jargon-free commentary rests on the premise, as he puts it, that “knowing the historical origins or sources of the text is no substitute for learning its meaning.”

At the same time, the newer movement of literary scholarship on the Bible, which *does* ostensibly thresh texts for meaning, fares not much better. Kass thinks these scholars too often busy themselves with cross-cultural comparisons, or they “read the Bible as literature but... do

not regard literature as an aid to wisdom.” Here too, as his own literary allusions and frequent reliance on Robert Alter, Robert D. Sacks, and Nahum M. Sarna show, Kass’ rejection is less than absolute. He is not unwilling to compare the labors of Jacob—whom he calls “the biblical counterpart of Odysseus”—for Rachel to Ferdinand’s struggle in *The Tempest* to win Miranda, the birth of Eve to Aristophanes’ account of the origin of the sexes in the *Symposium*, and Shechem’s rape of Dinah to the rape of Helen by Paris and the rape of the Sabine women. Still, Kass concludes that the Bible’s literary critics have a habit of reading it too narrowly.

So do traditionalist readers, including many Orthodox Jews, who often “brush aside textual ambiguity” in favor of a pious reading that “places certain obstacles in the way of a disinterested and philosophic pursuit of the truth.” Kass calls his own approach “reverent,” and indeed he does not indulge in myth-smashing. But he does think that many of those who regard it as the revealed word of God mistakenly deny that the Tora is also “a book that can be read and interrogated like any other.”

Kass’ interrogation of the text, in contrast, assumes the Bible to be a coherent narrative that serves to

convey universal truths entirely accessible even to those who do not make a faith commitment to it. He aims in his commentary on the Bible's first and most narrative book "to demonstrate by example a wisdom-seeking approach" that relies "as little as possible on intermediaries"—a way of reading that looks "into the mirror of the text to discover permanent aspects of our humanity." When studying in this way, Kass writes, one discovers that

the text is concerned with this question: Is it possible to find, institute, and preserve a way of life, responsive to both the promise and the peril of the human creature, that accords with man's true standing in the world and that serves to perfect his god-like possibilities?

Seen in this light, the wisdom of the Bible—and especially of Genesis, which "shows us not so much what happened as what *always* happens"—is timeless; but Kass wants us to see that it is also urgently timely. In "our current situation of moral and spiritual neediness," he writes, we need biblical wisdom more than ever, precisely because "the dominant modes of modern thought are... inhospitable to the pursuit of wisdom."

Kass blames two "anti-wisdoms" in particular for this new form of ungraciousness to the biblical view of the world: Modern science, which

"broke with both its philosophic and religious ancestors, especially in abandoning the large metaphysical-theological questions and spiritual-moral concerns that preoccupied them"; and the forces of agnosticism, nihilism, and moral relativism that have plunged modern civilization into deep moral crisis. "The West often seems tired," he warns, and he looks to Genesis to lend it vigor.

Thus, in Kass' reading, the story of Cain's murder of Abel "shows the reader what unregulated human life is like... [and] why the natural or uninstructed way does not work." The account of Noah and his sons—Ham, who shamelessly looks upon his father's nakedness, and Shem and Japheth, who respectfully cover it—illustrates the need for both filial loyalty and paternal dignity and occasions, in one of Kass' rhetorical asides, a censure of contemporary moral decay:

Honor and respect, fear and awe, and filial piety seem increasingly vestiges of an archaic world. Democratic fathers find it easier not to exercise authority; democratic sons find it easier not to recognize it. Sex, utterly demystified, is now sport and chatter; nakedness is no big deal.

Similarly, Isaac, who is the first to be born into the "new way" and who, in an act of great symbolic weight,

re-digs Abraham's wells, is "the prototype of the son who passively receives a tradition that he must actively choose to make his own." And the story of Jacob's wife, the lovely but long infertile Rachel, demonstrates that "erotic love of the sort Jacob felt for Rachel may not be the best foundation for marriage and family life... the love of the beautiful is, by itself, sterile."

What, then, is Kass' Genesis that it can help re-moralize the West? It is, first, a profoundly political book, one with a great deal to say about the unregulated "state of nature"; the Noahide law (which "stands as a perfect embodiment of the foundations of law in general") as a first response to that state; the emergence of the family as "the first human institution [and] hence the first element of society"; the education of the "founders"—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—in international relations; and the unveiling of a "new national-political teaching" to the children of Israel. But the theme Kass brings into boldest relief concerns the morally ambiguous roots of cities and civilization.

In his deft interpretive hands, for example, the story of the tower of Babel, the builders of which declare, "let us make for ourselves a name," becomes a tale about the disastrous arrogance of "the universal, technological, secular city," and it inspires

another of Kass' forceful polemical pivots:

The project of Babel has been making a comeback. Ever since the beginning of the seventeenth century, when men like Bacon and Descartes called mankind to the conquest of nature for the relief of man's estate, the cosmopolitan dream of the city of man has guided many of the best minds and hearts.... Whether we think of the heavenly city of the *philosophes* or the post-historical age toward which Marxism points... whether we look at the World Wide Web... or the globalized economy, or the biomedical project to re-create human nature without its imperfections; whether we confront the spread of the post-modern claim that all truth is of human creation—we see everywhere evidence of the revived Babylonian vision.

Unlike Aristotle, who took a positive view of the origins of the city in the *Politics* ("Man," he wrote famously, "is by nature a political animal"), Kass argues that Genesis emphasizes the dark foundations of the city, in which prideful self-sufficiency, violence, and the desire for domination reign. He invites us to see, over Abraham's shoulder, "why the city—not just Sodom, but the city as such—is a breeding ground for injustice," and to accept that "politics—the life of cities and communities—*necessarily* involves the suffering of at least some innocent and righteous people."

But Kass also reads Genesis philosophically—which means that he looks to it for universal wisdom about the special dignity of man, the nature of free will, the knowledge of good and evil, and, most of all, how best to live. Here, too, a single theme—in this case the limits of human reason—emerges from, and in turn tints, Kass’ way of reading. To take one example: It is *reason*, not desire, Kass rather unconventionally claims, that “leads human freedom astray” in the Garden of Eden, where the serpent tempting Eve embodies “the separated and beguiling voice of autonomous human reason speaking up against innocence and obedience.” Such a reading boldly sets aside many centuries of mainstream Jewish exegesis in order to arrive at the philosophic heart of the matter.

If *The Beginning of Wisdom* is impressive in its ambitions, it is also striking in its limitations. To begin with, there is something unnerving about reading politically a book suspicious of the *polis* and reading philosophically a book suspicious of reason. Even apart from its rebuke to rationality, the Bible is not, Kass himself admits, “a work of philosophy.... Neither its manner nor its manifest purposes are philosophical.” But he fails adequately to explain how he can then examine it in “the same spirit

in which I read Plato’s *Republic* or Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.” The many philosophical books that measure the limits of reason—whether by Kant or Nietzsche or Kierkegaard or, for that matter, Franz Rosenzweig—are one thing: They want to be taken as philosophy. The decidedly nondiscursive Bible is something else: Its very essence seems pervaded by inescapably *anti*-philosophical notions like the one expressed in Psalms that gives Kass’ book its title: “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God.”

But there is another important way in which Genesis, though it yields many insights to Kass’ keen verse-by-verse commentary, resists his method and larger purposes. To read philosophically, for Kass, is to read with an eye to universal wisdom; so it is no surprise that his approach works best in Genesis’ first eleven chapters, which form a universal human history spanning from creation to the tower of Babel. But it falters in the second half, where the narrative narrows its focus to the single family-cum-nascent nation of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Kass, of course, is well aware of this shift, and explains it thus:

After and because of Babel, God abandons his plan to work simultaneously with the entire human race. But he in no way abandons his universal aspirations for human beings.

On the contrary, he pursues the same ends but by different means. Having dispersed mankind into many nations, he now chooses one nation to carry his way as a light unto all the others, and he takes up a prominent role as that nation's educator and guide.

But that very shift cuts against Kass' principle that the Bible's first aim is to evince universal truths. The rest of the Bible, from the story of Jacob's sons to the laws of Leviticus, and down to the final cry of Chronicles, tells the tale of a very specific, uniquely burdened, divinely visited nation—a story that defies universalization at every turn. “The theological concept of election is manifestly present in Genesis,” the biblical scholar Gary A. Anderson has written, “and election is a stumbling block to any philosophical reading of the text.”

The critic James Wood has said that every book brings with it its own criteria of evaluation, and this is certainly true for the book of books. Kass' commentary shows that although the Bible—which in the end is neither literature nor philosophy nor political treatise—benefits from being put in conversation with the greatest examples of these other kinds of wisdom, it magnificently resists being read like them.

At the same time, however, Kass has given Genesis a rhetorically impassioned, morally articulate, and profoundly intelligent reading that forms a powerful invitation to marvel at its inexhaustible richness and to take its wisdom seriously. That is accomplishment enough.

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