From “For Those Who Can’t Believe” by Rabbi Harold Schulweis

Given the fallible heroes of the Bible and even some shortcomings of God, what does it mean to call the Bible

sacred? If by sacred we mean that the Bible is inerrant, its heroes infallible, its morality complete, then its sacred

character seems questionable. But the Bible is holy not because it is the final word but because it is the first word of an unending tradition. Within the biblical text itself, there is evidence of moral change and growth. To cite one such dramatic instance, the self-revelation of God's thirteen attributes describes God as "keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving inquity and transgression and sin and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and upon the children's children unto the third and unto the fourth generation" (Exodus 34:7). However, the notion of inherited guilt and punishment in Exodus is explicitly repudiated in the canonized Bible. “The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him*"* (Ezekiel 18:20). The Jewish faith does not end with Deuteronomy. Its teachings are shaped by the conscience of its interpreters and are evident in the religious commentaries of its masters. The very text of Exodus concerning the visitation of evil upon children is lifted from the biblical text by the rabbis and introduced into the festival liturgy, but with startling changes. The liturgy recited in the synagogue today reads: “Keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin and acquitting." The rabbinic tradition boldly omits the phrase "by no means clear the guilty" from the prayer book. This omission offers further testimony of the evolutionary character of the collective conscience within the tradition.