



Is God
a Moral
Monster?

MAKING SENSE OF
THE OLD TESTAMENT GOD

Paul Copan

PRAYER TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.

O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit, we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations.

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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Is the God of the Old Testament a Bully, Murderer and Oppressor?

There are four contemporary best-selling authors today who are God-deniers and are known as the “New Atheists.”

They often cite the apparent contradiction in the nature of the God of the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament as a means of attacking Judeo/Christian monotheism.

Some have called them the “four horsemen” – Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. Dawkins is quoted as follows:

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction; jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

Marcionism

- Heretical sect founded in A.D. 144 at Rome by Marcion and continuing in the West for 300 years.
- They rejected the writings of the Old Testament and taught that Christ was not the Son of the God of the Jews, but the Son of the good God, who was different from the God of the Ancient Covenant (Dualism of Manichaeism)

Marcion's Canon (12 of 27 books)		The other 15 books	
Gospel of Marcion (assumed Luke/Acts)		Matthew	Hebrews
Galatians	1 Thessalonians	Mark	1 Peter
1 Corinthians	2 Thessalonians	John	2 Peter
2 Corinthians	Ephesians	Romans	1 John
Romans	Colossians	1 Timothy	2 John
	Philemon	2 Timothy	3 John
	Philippians	Titus	Jude
			Revelation

The Church and the Bible

- “All Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Inspired can be translated “God breathed”. This means God (the Holy Spirit) is the primary author of the Bible.
- The Principle of biblical inerrancy follows logically from the principle of divine authorship. After all, God cannot lie, and he cannot make mistakes.
- The language used by God in the Sacred Scripture is known as “accommodation”. Sometimes the Lord stoops down to communicate by “condescension” – that is he speaks as humans speak, as if he had the same passions and weakness that we do (for example God says he was “sorry” that he made man in Genesis 6:6)
- God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New.

A Jealous, Egocentric Deity?



- The God of the Bible seems to seek attention and crave praise. He's out to "make a name for Himself" (2 Sam. 7:23). He delivers his people from Egypt, "for the sake of His name" (Ps. 106-8).
- God makes humans in his image (Gen. 1:26-27). God is like a vain toy maker creating dolls that look just like him. Isn't God's act of creating humans in his image just another sign of his vanity?
- The New Atheists consider Yahweh to be impatient, jealous, and easily provoked – a petty and insecure deity.
- Dawkins claims that God breaks into a "monumental rage whenever His chosen people flirted with a rival god."

The Nature of God

- The First Vatican Council stated clearly that God is "almighty, eternal ... infinite in intelligence, in will, and in all perfection ... absolutely simple and immutable ... of supreme beatitude in and from Himself."
- "Immutable" means unchangeable, in that He radiates every "perfection" at every moment, and dwells in infinite "beatitude" or, in other words, infinite joy. This also means that God does not have a strict and vengeful side to His personality that needs to be "bought off" before He can be merciful to us.
- God has no "sides" to His character at all. Hard as this may be for us (as finite creatures) to understand, God is always infinitely perfect in every way, perfectly merciful AND perfectly just in everything that He does. In fact, all his perfections are manifest in His every action.
- God does not have changing feelings or attitudes. If there are passages in Scripture that seem to imply that He does, these need to be understood as metaphorical ways of speaking about God's total opposition to evil and total support of all good.



- God's anger is the divine perfection of "justice," a justice by which He permits the self-destructive effects of sin and evil to run their course, thereby rendering to the sinner his due. In other words, God's "wrath" means that if we are stubbornly evil and impenitent, He will permit our sins to have their inevitable destructive (and especially self-destructive) effects upon our bodies and souls.
- Describing God as "jealous" is a metaphor used to stress the gravity of the responsibility of worshipping only the true God. Being omniscient, God recognizes how intrinsically evil it is to worship non-existent gods (Baal, Zeus, Thor, Shiva). The proper object of worship (adoration) is the true God only.
- Human beings by our nature are ordered toward worship. We either worship God or something else (an idol). Idolatry takes many forms, the worship of self, money, power, sex, control, etc. God created all things in the material universe for the sake of man and He created man for Himself.

Child Abuse and Bullying?



- So what do we do with God's startling command to Abraham in Genesis 22:2 "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love ... and offer him ... as a burnt offering?"
- The Law of Moses condemned child sacrifice. In fact this was one of the horrible practices for which God judged the Canaanites.



- Let's begin to look at how God begins dealing with Abraham in light of His plan for Israel and salvation history. In Genesis Chapter 12 God instructs Abraham to leave his home in Babylon to go to the land that I will show you (Canaan/Israel).
- God also promised that He would make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars. At this time Abraham did not have Isaac as a son, so he trusted God, left Babylon and started a journey toward Canaan.
- According to the Book of Genesis, Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was past 90 when Isaac was born. The birth of Isaac was truly a miraculous gift from God.
- Abraham had faith and trust in an all-powerful God and knew full well that God could bring Isaac back from the dead even if he was offered as a sacrifice.
- God's command to Abraham was a test that Abraham passed resulting in the promise that in Abraham's seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God uses this event as a pedagogical foreshadowing of the future Messiah – Jesus Christ, the Savior of all the nations.



Notice the typology of the event and how it points to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross:

- Abraham is willing to offer his only son whom he loves, God the Father offers up Jesus his only son whom he loves;
- Abraham is to offer Isaac up on Mount Moriah, Jesus dies on Calvary which is located on Mount Moriah:
- Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice on his back up the mountain, Jesus carries his cross up to Calvary;
- Isaac willingly is bound for the sacrifice, Jesus is willing nailed to the Cross.

Clearly God's plan was to test Abraham's faith and trust and to use the events as a means of foreshadowing the sacrificial offering of the Messiah.

Mosaic Laws

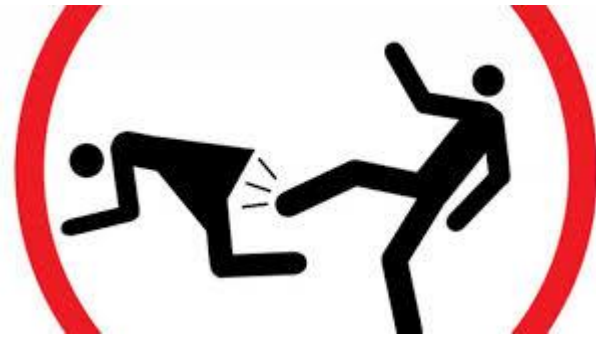


- There are 613 distinct laws (365 prohibitions, 248 positive commands) in the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).
- These vast arrays of laws were meant for the nation of Israel and dealt with the morality of the people, liturgical worship and dietary laws.
- To many, these perplexing precepts, principles, and punishments seem odd, arbitrary and severe.

- The Torah (Law of Moses at Sinai) was given to a specific group of people (the Israelites) living in a specific culture (the Semitic culture of the near east) at a specific period of time (@ 1,500 BC) and the law was a temporary measure, less than ideal, not designed to be permanent and eventually to be replaced by something better (the New Covenant established by Jesus).
- How does God deal with Israel at this time in salvation history?
- Remember that because of the sin of Adam, the world is in darkness and unable to obey the moral precepts established at the very beginning (Gen 1-2). So, God accommodates himself to the human condition and fallen social structures by providing precepts that are less than ideal. “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt. 19:8).

- Mosaic times were indeed “crude” and “uncultured” in many ways. So, Sinai legislation makes a number of moral improvements without completely overhauling ancient Near Eastern social structures.
- God “works” with Israel as He finds her. He meets his people where they are while seeking to show them a higher ideal in the context of ancient Near Eastern life.
- Israel’s laws reveal dramatic moral improvements over the practices of other ancient Near Eastern peoples.
- The Babylonian laws of Hammurabi (1750 BC) state that for certain crimes, the tongue, breast, hand or ear be cut off. One severe punishment involved the accused being dragged around a field by cattle.
- The Code of Hammurabi insisted on death for a thief, whereas the Old Testament demanded only the remittance of double compensation for the loss (Exod. 22:4)

Misogyny, Polygamy and Concubinage?



- Why does Sarah refer to her husband as “my master” (Gen.18:12)
- Why can’t women participate in the priesthood of Israel?
- Why does God permit polygamy?
- What about those concubines?



- Genesis 1-2 points us to the ideal view of women, which is far from a fallen, skewed, or demeaning attitude.
- God creates male and female in his image. Eve is taken from Adam's side, a sign of equality and partnership, not one of a superior to an inferior.
- Although Genesis 1-2 spells out the ideal of male-female equality, laws regarding women in Israel take a realistic approach to fallen human structures in the ancient Near East.
- In Israel's legislation God does two things. (1) He works within a patriarchal society to point Israel to a better path; and
- (2) He provides many protections and controls against abuses directed against females in admittedly substandard conditions.

Even with the shortcomings of the ancient Near Eastern culture, the Old Testament provides undeniable affirmations of the equality of male and female from the theological, historical and legal perspective.

- Theologically, female equality is presumed: “Honor your Father and your Mother” (Exod. 20:12) and “My son, observe the commandment of your father and do not forsake the teaching of your mother.” (Prov. 6:20).
- Historically the Old Testament is full of powerful matriarchs who were highly valued and exerted a great deal of influence. The testimony of the Old Testament authors reveals a perspective that can hardly be called misogynistic. Consider the following list: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Deborah, Esther, Judith, Ruth, Naomi etc. These strong women stepped forward and wielded influence with the best of men.
- Legally, the moral and ceremonial laws of Israel presumed that women were not only equal but also shared equal moral responsibility with the men.

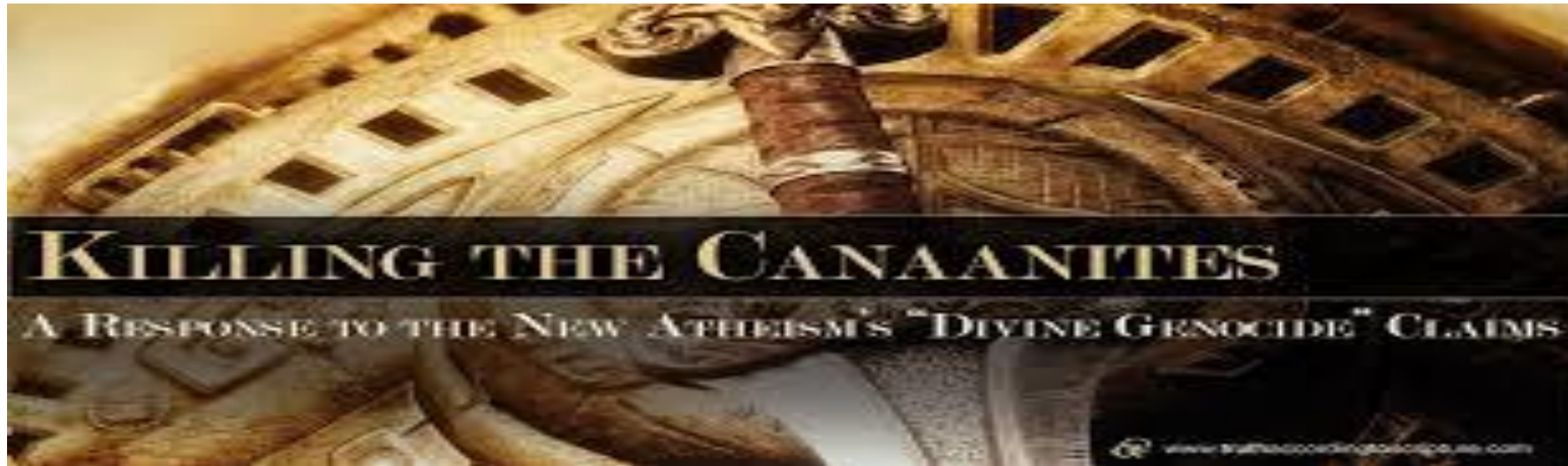


- In the ancient Near East, a married man could take a concubine – or second class wife when his first wife was presumed to be infertile (or even if she became sick).
- In such cases, it wasn't unusual for a man to take another wife to produce offspring. When we look at Israel's history, we see the influence of this practice fairly early on.
- The family was central, and having children was vital to carrying on the family memory. To be childless – and therefore heirless – was considered a tragedy and even a disgrace. So, a second-tier wife was often brought in to remedy the situation.
- While polygamous marriages including concubines occurred in the Old Testament without God's stamp of approval, keep in mind that such marriages still brought with them a husband's commitment to protect and provide for his wife. By contrast, if a child came through a woman hired for sexual pleasure, this brought shame and no inheritance (Jephthah in Judg. 11:1-2).

Female Priests?

- The religions of the ancient Near East commonly included fertility cult rituals, goddess worship, and priestesses (who served as the wife of the god).
- Temple prostitutes abounded, and sexual immorality was carried out in the name of religion.
- To have sex with the priestess meant union with the goddess you worshiped.
- In fact, sex with a temple prostitute would prompt Baal and his consort Asherah to have sex in heaven, which in turn would result in fertility all the way around – more kids, more cattle, more crops.
- Sex was deified in Canaan and other ancient Near Eastern cultures.
- Adultery was fine as long as sex was “religious”.
- The law of Moses sought to prevent Israelites from glorifying adultery.
- Keeping an all male priesthood, then, helped create this kind of religious distinction as well as preserved the sanctity of marriage.

Indiscriminate Massacre and Ethnic Cleansing?



Probably the most difficult Old Testament ethical issue is the divine command to kill the Canaanites.

“Only in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy themso that they may not teach you to do according to their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the Lord your God.” (Deut. 20-16-18)

Canaanite Morality

Leviticus 18:20-30

- You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife, and defile yourself with her.
- You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.
- You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.
- You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion.
- Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.
- But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you (for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled);
- otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people.
- So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am the Lord your God.

Divine Prophecy

According to the biblical text, Yahweh was willing to wait about 430 years before judgement befell the Canaanites.

- As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.
- Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.
- As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites [a Canaanite people] is not yet complete.”
(Gen 15:12-16)



So was God just picking on the Canaanites but not other peoples?

- No, Yahweh frequently threatened many nations with judgement when they crossed a certain moral threshold.
- For example, in Amos 1-2, God promised to “send fire” on nations surrounding Israel for their treacheries and barbarities.
- Clearly the command by God to destroy the Canaanites was a chastisement. This type of chastisement is not limited only to pagan nations; in fact, God used the pagan nations to bring judgement upon Israel over the centuries.
- In 722 BC, the Assyrians destroyed the 10 northern tribes, in 587 BC the Babylonians destroyed the temple and took the Jewish people into captivity; in 70 AD, 40 years after the crucifixion, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and 1.1 million Jews perished.

The Destruction of the Temple Foretold

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” (Matthew 24:1-2)

The Canaanites' Refusal to Acknowledge the One True God

Spies Sent to Jericho

Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. The king of Jericho was told, "Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land." Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land." But the woman took the two men and hid them.

Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men: "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. ***For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt***, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. ***The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.*** (Joshua ch. 2)

Cosmic Warfare

- The worship of idols wasn't innocent or harmless. The Old Testament connects idolatry with the demonic—that is, with the cosmic enemies of God who rebelled against him.
- Pharaoh, for example was the earthly representation of Egypt's gods and represented cosmic opposition to God.
- So in the exodus, Yahweh is the cosmic warrior who engages the evil powers of Egypt and the forces that inspire them.
- God's commands to Israel to wipe out Canaan's idols and false, immoral worship illustrate the cosmic warfare between Yahweh and the dark powers opposed to his rule.

Rhetorical Bravado

Joshua 10:40

So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded.

- Most Christians read Joshua's conquest stories as though they were a rendition of a literal crush, kill and destroy mission.
- Like his ancient Near Eastern contemporaries, Joshua used the rhetorical bravado language of his day, asserting that all the land was captured, all the kings defeated, and all the Canaanites destroyed.
- Some might accuse Joshua of being misleading or of getting it wrong. Not at all. He was speaking the language that everyone in his day would have understood.

Joshua's language concerning Jericho and Ai appears harsh at first glance:

Jericho Taken and Destroyed

So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. (Joshua 6:20-21)

Ai Captured by a Stratagem and Destroyed

When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and when all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai, and attacked it with the edge of the sword. The total of those who fell that day, both men and women, was twelve thousand—all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the sword, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their booty, according to the word of the Lord that he had issued to Joshua. So Joshua burned Ai, and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day. And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening; and at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree, threw it down at the entrance of the gate of the city, and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day. (Joshua 8:24-29)

Exaggeration Rhetoric

- The command to “utterly destroy” and to “put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” are ancient Near Eastern exaggeration rhetoric used to describe all the inhabitants of a town or region.
- Canaanite towns that the Israelites attacked such as Jericho and Ai were military forts or garrisons; the general population of women and children lived in the countryside and were not subject to Israelite attacks.
- There is no archaeological evidence of civilian populations at Jericho or Ai or in other cities mentioned in the book of Joshua.

Summary

- The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction;
- jealous and proud of it
- a petty, unjust
- control-freak
- bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser
- misogynistic
- homophobic
- racist
- infanticidal
- genocidal
- filicidal

