

The Deplorable God?

Since the dawn of the new millennium, the so-called New Atheists have waged a brutal war against religion (particularly Christianity) on multiple fronts all across the West. Led by the self-styled “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” namely, Christopher Hitchens (now deceased), Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins, a phalanx of books flooded the cultural landscape attacking everything from the existence of God and the reliability of the Bible, to the possibility of miracles. Even the value of prayer was questioned. While each of these attacks was damaging, perhaps no argument did more to undermine people's faith than the attack on God's character. Like Goliath in the valley, Hitchens wrote a defiant challenge to God's goodness blasphemously asserting that, God is not great. To the contrary, religion poisons everything.¹ Yet as brutal as was his charge, it paled in its vitriol next to Richard Dawkins' angry screed entitled, “The God Delusion.” The venom in Dawkins' pen dripped off every page but his most memorable ‘insight’ was this now oft-repeated quote: “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.”² Fortunately, the enthusiasm and acclaim with which these authors were greeted have died down, and the fervor of their acolytes has waned. Partly that is due to the crushing philosophical rebuttals offered by Christian apologists such as William Lane Craig, Alvin Plantinga, Frank Turek and others.³

Nevertheless, the wound to the public's perception of God's character has still not fully healed. I was reminded of this recently on my thirteen-hour ride home from camp during which I kept myself awake by listening to philosophical debates. One of these was between the aforementioned Sam Harris and syndicated talk-show host Dennis Prager. Over the course of the hour-long episode, Harris repeatedly complained about the seeming wickedness of God's Old Testament command to destroy the Canaanites. Likening it to the genocidal ethnic cleansing of Rwanda he ridiculed as laughable the notion that God is actually a merciful and gracious Redeemer. On the whole, Prager offered an admirable defense. He wryly observed that on atheism's worldview, objective morality does not exist and thus Harris has no real reason or basis to be upset. It was both devastating and humorous. Still, for a Christian, his Jewish perspective left something to be desired. So how should we as Christians defend the conquest narrative? It's a good question, and while I would never claim to be *the* authority on the issue, I think a couple options are so bad they need to be euthanized before they do any more damage.

For starters, we should reject as a ‘dead end’ any attempt to contrast the character of God in the Old Testament with His character in the New Testament. Sadly, this is a common temptation. It is not unusual, for example, to hear Christians thank God that they live in an era when He is dealing in grace, mercy, and love, rather than the OT when He was all about fire and brimstone, war, vengeance, and punishment. Such a view derives from a serious misreading of both the Old and the New Testaments. After all, it is in the OT that God said, “*I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live*” (Ez. 33:11). It is in the OT that He was first revealed to be “*merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin*” (Ex. 34:6-7). Far from bent on punishment the psalmist said, “*He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust*” (Ps. 103:10-14). And lest we think this was only true for Israel, consider God's mercy on Nineveh. As Jonah learned well, “*The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works*” (Ps. 145:9). The OT is emphatic that God is full of loving-kindness and tender mercy.

On the other hand, despite its emphasis on God's love and grace, the NT consistently and vigorously promises divine wrath and judgment. Speaking to His disciples of those cities that refused to hear His word or receive them as His emissaries Jesus said, “*It shall be more tolerable for the land of*

¹ Cf. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*: New York, NY: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, ©2007

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*: Boston Mass.]: Mariner Books, 2008; 1st Mariner Books ed, 2008), 51.

³ E.g., cf. William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*: Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010; 1st ed, 2010); Alvin Plantinga, “The Dawkins Confusion,” *Books and Culture Apr 2007* (04/01; 2007, 2007); Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't have enough Faith to be an Atheist*: Wheaton, Ill. : Crossway Books, ©2004, 2004)

Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city" (Mt. 10:15). Indeed, as John Wenham has pointed out, "It is fallacious... to set the "bloodthirsty" Old Testament over against the "gentle" New Testament. Possibly the phenomenon is more crude in the Old Testament than in the New, but of the two the New Testament is the more terrible, for the Old Testament seldom speaks of anything beyond temporal judgments ... whereas the Son of man in the Gospels pronounces eternal punishment."⁴

The second cul-de-sac that should be avoided is the notion that Israel somehow misunderstood God's command and engaged in a slaughter, which the Lord never intended. Such a view can safely be dismissed as absurd given that if Israel had misunderstood Him, then God would have been obligated to correct their misunderstanding yet He never offers a single word of criticism or clarification. On the contrary, "the failure to properly and completely drive out the Canaanites was condemned as *disobedience* to His will (Jg. 1:27-2:3).⁵ The bottom line is God did command it, and there is no indication that His mind on the matter has changed with the arrival of the New Testament era. Thus, neither one of these two possible theodicies offers a viable defense.

So again, how should we push back against the growing claim that God is some sort of moral monster? Well, I surely won't exhaust the issue, but there are a few things that I think are worth bearing in mind. For example, the charge that the conquest was a form of genocidal ethnic cleansing fails to acknowledge that God's command was based on the Canaanite's sin and idolatry, not their ethnicity. Also, because God is the creator and author of all life, He has the moral right to give and take life as He sees fit. God has no moral obligation to preserve anyone's life especially not when they are depraved civilizations that defiantly refuse to repent. Lastly, the impression that God ordered or that Israel attempted the wholesale and indiscriminate extermination of the Canaanites is based on sloppy exegesis as God's command applied only to those Canaanites who stubbornly refused to be dispossessed. Of course, each of these replies themselves needs to be expanded and defended but alas there is no space. To that task, I will turn in the next article.

⁴ John William Wenham, *The Goodness of God*: Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, 1974 in Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand : Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*: Grand Rapids, Mich. : Zondervan, c2008, 2008), 81.

⁵ Ross D. Inman, "God Behaving Badly?" (Classroom Lecture Notes, Spring, 2017).