



Book Review

Is God a Moral Monster? Making sense of the Old Testament God

By Paul Copan (Baker, 2011)

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Recent years have seen the rise of New Atheism. Two of its chief proponents have been Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. While atheism has been around for millennia, the 'new' atheists stand out with their strident criticism of all things religious.

This is particularly so of God as they see him portrayed in the Old Testament. God is labelled by Dawkins as a 'moral monster' (hence the title of the book).

Here are Dawkins' own words: *'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.'*¹

I confess I've struggled with some of the commands found in the pages of the Old Testament. The twentieth century probably stands out as one of the most genocidal in history (think Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Rwanda, the Balkans). Society's consequent sensitivity to such mass killings has often made me prefer to skip over 'offending' chapters in Joshua. And I can't say I've seen the point behind many of the laws contained in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They can seem pernicky and unfair. Am I the only woman who's had difficulty with passages such as Leviticus 12: 1-8? And I'm often glad we're under a new covenant when I read these books.

The author of the book under review, Paul Copan, has been through the writings of the New Atheists and has drawn up a list of specific charges made by them against God and religion. The charges include: Canaanite genocide, God being a jealous and egocentric deity, the binding of Isaac, ethnocentrism/racism, chattel slavery, bride price, women as inferior to men, the harshness of the Mosaic laws and the irrelevance of God for the existence of morality.

Copan's book is divided into four sections. The first describes the New Atheists and details their complaints against God. Sections 2 and 3 are where the second half of the book's subtitle, *'Making Sense of the Old Testament God'*, is addressed. Section 2 deals with the nature of God. God's apparent neediness in terms of praise and worship and his jealousy, and even the command to bind Isaac, are seen from the perspective of the Creator/creature relationship and what God does to nurture and develop this.

The third section places the Old Testament in the context of life in the ancient Near East and deals with a raft of issues including food and cleanliness laws, penal laws, marriage laws, laws relating to slavery and the killing of the Canaanites. I found these chapters particularly enlightening as they gave me the historical, social and cultic background of the nations around Israel. The Israelites so often wanted to imitate these nations whereas the Mosaic Law represented a call to higher moral standards and ideals. So, in that context, God's laws were lenient and consistent through generations (and thus not capricious) and can be viewed as a tutor for the time when the higher call of Jesus would arrive.

The final section (in my opinion, the weakest part of the book) considers whether it is possible for morality to exist without God and whether naturalistic evolution can explain the existence of morality.

A list of further readings is included at the end of each chapter and Copan also includes a section with discussion/study questions, which would be helpful if you are using the book in a group setting.

I found the book to be clear, thoughtful and helpful. I highly recommend it. ■

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Bantam, 2006) 31

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