



What Do We Do with the God of the Old Testament

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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Introduction:

“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, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”¹ Thus says Richard Dawkins in his 2006 best seller, The God Delusion. And according to the preface to the paperback edition, he uses this passage as the warm up and icebreaker for new audiences and it always gets a good-natured laugh.² He later called God a “psychotic delinquent”³ and “the monster of the Bible.”⁴ He laid down a challenge saying, “Those of us schooled from infancy in his ways can become desensitized to their horror.”⁵

Is that true; are we simply desensitized to the horrors of God? In **Deuteronomy 7:1-2**, God told the Israelites as they conquered the Canaanites they were to devote them to complete destruction, showing them no mercy. We see the complete destruction of three cities with all their inhabitants in Canaan: Jericho (**Joshua 6:24**), Ai (**Joshua 8:28**), and Hazor (**Joshua 11:11**). We see all of Achan’s family killed in response to his sin of holding back some of the devoted items at Jericho (**Joshua 7:25-26**). The angel of God killed 185,000 soldiers of the Assyrians in one night (**II Kings 19:35**). I could go on. There is no doubt that the Old Testament is a very bloody book.

Some, having heard these stories all their lives, have not given very much thought to it. Some view them as the embarrassing secret we hope to keep hidden from seekers until they have greater faith. Sadly, some have had their eyes opened to it by the likes of Richard Dawkins and just don’t know what to do with this God of the Old Testament. This is a very real issue. It is not one to be dismissed. We must face it or else we may receive the same rebuke as Job’s three friends in **Job 42:7**, “My anger burns against you...for you have not spoken of me what is right...” It seems that God is more interested in truth than shoddy, weak, and inaccurate defenses.

So, what do we do with the God of the Old Testament?

Discussion:

I. What we don’t do

A. *The “Two Different Gods” Defense*

1. Throughout the centuries, some have suggested the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are simply different gods. Granted this is usually part of some Gnostic mysticism and probably none of us would take this seriously.
2. Note **John 1:1-3**. This beginning of the New Testament story declares that the God of the New Testament is the same God as that in the Old. There are not two different gods in the two different testaments.

B. *The “That’s Not the Way God Is Now” Defense*

1. Though few of us would even consider the two different gods defense, many who claim to be Christian today fall prey to a similar defense. “Sure, I see that from God in the Old Testament, but that’s not the way He is now. Just read the New Testament.” We don’t see two different gods, but we sometimes act like between the old and new testaments God became a Christian so we can forgive Him of His evil in the Old.
2. Interestingly, the only reason we are having this discussion is because of the New Testament. The influence of Jesus’ teaching and the New Testament doctrines of love and peace are the reason the Western world thinks the way of peace is more enlightened than the way of violence. Let’s face it, if not for the teaching of the New Testament, we would still live in a world of violence in which people wouldn’t think a thing about the Old Testament’s violence.
3. However, we do have to provide proper defense and claiming God changed isn’t one. **Hebrews 13:8** says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” If we are going to believe the Bible, we can’t believe in a recovered, transformed, or converted God. He is the same in both covenants or it just isn’t true.

¹ Dawkins, Richard, The God Delusion, Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 2006, p 51.

² Ibid. p 17.

³ Ibid. p 59.

⁴ Ibid. p 68.

⁵ Ibid. p 51.

C. *The “Times Were Different Then” Defense*

1. Some suggest the real problem is with us. We are enlightened and know this violence is wrong. In the Bible days, people were more brutal. All the nations and kings acted like this. We can tell horrendous tales of Assyrian brutality, Babylonian tortures, Roman cruelty. These stories bother us, but they didn't bother the people to whom they were written.
2. This might work if God were nothing more than a figment of our imagination. This defense cannot work for a true and living God. The real God is not a product of man's culture. He will not be a violent God to a violent culture, but a peaceful God to an enlightened one. He will be what He is and teach the cultures to respect Him as He is irrespective of their own outlook on violence.
3. **Isaiah 55:9** declares God's ways are above ours. The violent ways of men are not a good defense for God's violence. His ways are above ours; they do not coincide with ours. If the ways of our God simply coincide with ours, He is just a construct of our own making.

D. *The “He's God, He Can Do What He Wants” Defense (or The Misunderstanding Job Defense)*

1. Speaking on a practical level, there is some merit to this defense. After all, if, as I believe, God is real, and, as I also believe, He is the most powerful being in the universe who holds our eternities in His hands, there is a sense in which our duty is not really to make sense of Him, but simply to submit to Him.
2. God is what He is. Atheists seem to believe that if they can prove God is unlikable, He must not be real. Please understand; this discussion is not about whether or not God is real. I don't have to like God for Him to be real. God doesn't have to be pleasant to be real. This discussion is actually a question about whether or not the Bible presents a consistent picture of the unchanging God. If He was a malevolent God in the Old Testament, but a merciful one in the New, we have a problem as Bible believers. That is why we need to reconsider this defense. The pagan gods were a fickle and ever-changing group. They did act on the basis of “We're gods; we get to do what we want.” The Bible's God does not act on that basis. Consider **Hebrews 6:18**.
3. Some of us will make this defense on the basis of Job. At first, it does seem God's major defense against Job in **Job 38-41** is, “I'm God, I get to do what I want.” However, that is not exactly the point of God's interview with Job. The point is considering how amazing God is in comparison to us; we ought to trust Him that He knows a bit more than we do instead of acting as if He should explain His every decision to us.
4. While on a practical level, there might be something to this defense. On a holiness level, it falls short. It would be the height of hypocrisy for God to teach us to be peaceful, loving people who do not murder if His modus operandi is to simply murder anyone who got in His way. It doesn't make sense that He would tell us “You shall be holy for I am holy” (**I Peter 1:16; Leviticus 11:44**) if He defines holiness with peace and love, but He is violent and cruel as a rule.

II. God's real defense: Five Keys to Understanding God's Action in the Old Testament

A. *God is the Judge*

1. If I decided that you had broken the law, took you into a class room with some of my friends, tried you, convicted you, and then took you out back and hung you, what would that be? That would be murder. I don't have that right or authority. However, if you were arrested, brought before a judge, tried according to the courts of the land, and convicted, that would be different. **Romans 13:1-4** demonstrates when governments wield the power of the sword, they do not do so in vain and they are to do so for good. There is a difference between vigilantes usurping the role of judges and actually being the judge.
2. God created us and therefore has the right to judge us. Richard Dawkins and his ilk do not like that, because they prefer to believe no one is higher than them and they get to do whatever they want. However, God has the right to judge them. God had the right to judge folks in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and today. When man tries to usurp the role of God, he is wicked and evil. When God fulfills His role, He is doing His duty. This is Paul's argument in **Romans 3:5-6**. This is why God says, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” while asking us to pursue the course of peace with others (**Romans 12:17-19**).
3. Please note **Genesis 15:13-16**. The destruction brought on the peoples of Canaan was not ethnic cleansing. It was God's judgment. In fact, God forestalled the judgment because at the time of Abraham, the people had not done anything worthy of such judgment. The demise of Jericho, Ai, Hazor, and the rest of Canaan was judgment by the Judge.
4. Here is where the point of God's defense to Job comes in. If God, as I believe, really exists, and God, as I also believe, is the most powerful being in the universe who created all things, He is wiser than us. Perhaps we should trust Him. **Psalms 98:7-9** provides us with comfort. God judges with equity and righteousness. We can trust Him to judge rightly. That doesn't mean we'll like His judgment. It just means it will be right.

B. *Sin is just that awful*

1. The bigger problem here is not that God didn't understand how awful what He did in the Old Testament was. The real problem is that we don't understand how awful sin is. **Ezekiel 18:20** says, "The soul who sins shall die." **Romans 6:23** says the wages of sin is death. Consider that the whole story of mankind begins with this very point (**Genesis 2:17**). In our finite wisdom, we say, "But isn't that harsh?" Especially since we understand the real judgment wasn't the physical death, but the spiritual death of eternal damnation. Darwin viewed the punishment of sin as the lynchpin for why he finally lost belief in the God of the Bible. In his autobiography, he wrote: "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all of my friends, will be everlasting (sic) punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."⁶ Whether we wish it to be true or not is of no consequence. To be honest, I wish Darwin hadn't travelled on the H.M.S. Beagle to the Galapagos Islands or written his book "On the Origin of Species." However, my wishing doesn't make any of those things less real.
2. Understanding the awfulness of sin, is the point of confession. In **I John 1:8-9**, the word translated "confess" is "homologeō," literally meaning to say the same thing as. Confessing our sins is not merely saying that we do sin. Confessing means saying what God does about sin. The Old Testament demonstrates the awfulness of sin. We need to see sin in the same awful light God does. Understand this: the atheists believe that unless God views sin the way they do, He must not be real. That is no argument at all. The Old Testament teaches that we must see sin as God does. It is awful, despicable, destructive, and worthy of death.

C. *The real judgment and reward are not what happens in this life*

1. Some atheists and skeptics can almost wrap their minds around the God as judge argument and the destruction as judgment argument until they consider Jericho, Ai, Hazor and all their little children—children who did not know their right hand from their left and were not old enough to commit sin. While our Calvinist friends take an easy out by saying the children were born in sin worthy of judgment, I believe the Bible teaches children are not accountable. **Deuteronomy 1:34-40** demonstrates this when God judged Israel for their lack of faith, but kept alive the children who were not accountable for the sin. Therefore, many folks ask what about the babies and children who died in these judgments on sin. The answer is that the real judgment and reward is not what happened in this life, but what comes in the next. While God certainly disciplines us within this life, physical death is not the judgment. It is merely the summons to judgment.
2. **Ezekiel 9:1-11** presents a vision. Keep in mind, this is a vision, not what actually happened. But it represented God's work. The point is not that in the judgment on Judah no innocent person died. The point is that God knows those who are His. When the temporal judgment occurs and people die, God protects the innocent in eternity. Add to this **Revelation 7:1-17**. In **vss. 2-3**, God marks or places a seal on those who were innocent and would escape the judgment. Then we read about those sealed (**vss. 4-8**). Then we see a great multitude clothed in white (**vss. 9-12**). The key is to notice who these are. They are the innocents who died in the great tribulation, the judgment of God on man for rejecting Him (**vss. 13-17**). Notice, they have died but they aren't complaining. They have been invited to the judgment and ushered into an eternal reward.
3. As much as I hate to go down the rabbit hole chasing all the anticipated objections, I know that the skeptics like to respond to this by saying, "Then why don't we round up all the children and kill them so they can go straight to heaven and not risk going to hell." The answer is simply this: God is the judge and we are not. We don't get to take it on ourselves to work out God's plan for Him. It is God's will that people live to accountability and learn to live by faith. The point of this is not that we should go around killing innocents so they can be with God. The point is that when innocent people die it is not the tragedy atheists want to make it out to be.

D. *Don't miss God's mercy in the Old Testament*

1. The mercy of God in the Old Testament is often overlooked in these discussions. Folks today, even Christians, look at God in the Old Testament and see Him as vengeful, hateful, mean, and vicious and express their thanks that by the New Testament He changed. Now He's merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love. However, that is not how the people who served Him in the Old Testament thought of Him.
2. Just one example that stands out to me is **Jonah 4:2**. Jonah had run from God when called to preach the coming destruction of Nineveh. However, he did not run because he feared the Assyrians. He did not run because he was afraid they would reject the message. He ran because he was afraid they might repent and the loving, merciful, forgiving God he served might relent from the disaster He had planned. Look at the message Jonah was to preach according to **Jonah 3:4**. There was not even a statement that if they repented they would be spared. They were just told they were going to be destroyed. However, they did repent and they were spared.

⁶ http://www.update.uu.se/~fbendz/library/cd_relig.htm

E. *The purpose of the Old Testament is to teach us that without Christ, we die*

1. Perhaps this is the most important point we need to make. Perhaps this is the point we least understand. What is the purpose behind the Old Testament? What was the real purpose of all the laws, the sacrifices, the stories? God didn't tell us everything that ever happened in Israel. He didn't tell us everything that ever happened in the world. Why tell us these things?
2. **Romans 10:4** says Christ is the end, that is, the goal of the Law. **Galatians 3:21-29** demonstrates that the purpose of the Law was to lead us to Jesus Christ. The purpose of everything we read in the Old Testament is to make us understand how much we need a Savior and how much we need Jesus.
3. The understanding of the judgmental deaths in the Old Testament becomes clear in the teaching of Jesus in **Luke 13:1-5**. Jesus looked at the awful tragedies of Pilate sacrificing some Galileans and of the fall of the tower in Siloam. His teaching was, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." What is the point of the graphic and violent deaths of sinners in the Old Testament? Without Jesus, we all perish. The truly amazing thing is not that some people died because of their sins in the Old Testament; the truly amazing thing is that God allowed anyone to live despite their sins. This is really Paul's argument in **Romans 3:23-26**. God had divine forbearance for past sins in order to bring Jesus into the world at the right time so the people throughout all time that lived by faith in Him could be forgiven and set free to pursue righteousness and glorify God.

Conclusion:

Our God is a righteous, holy, and merciful judge. He is a judge, who in His forbearance passed over our past sins and brought Jesus into our lives that we might be forgiven and not receive the eternal death we deserve. Every bit of the Old Law points the way to Jesus, whether it is the laws, the sacrifices, the stories, the judgments. Therefore, we do not see a fickle God. We do not see a converted God. We do not see a changing God. We see the unified, eternal God working through both covenants to bring about His plan to save us through His Son. The message of the Old Testament is not look at how mean God was then. The message is look at what our outcome would be without Jesus. We need Jesus. Are you in Jesus?