Timeless Truth in Truthless Times - George Bassilios

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Chapter 31 - Why Does God Seem So Violent in the Old Testament?

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Why Does God Seem So Violent in the Old Testament?

Many skeptics assert that God is portrayed in the Old Testament as a cruel and ruthless God who orders the execution of innocent men, women, and children.

In his book *The God Delusion*, atheist Richard Dawkins writes, "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."[201]

Are such descriptions of God accurate? Is there a contradiction between what Christians profess about God vs. what is recorded in the Old Testament books of the Bible?

The short answer to this question is "No!"

often by people trying to prove that God is cruel. From this example, you can draw parallels to similar actions God performed elsewhere in the Old Testament.

To begin understanding this event, and its circumstances, let's take a closer look and examine the following:

The Canaanites were extremely wicked: Canaan, Noah's grandson, was cursed by Noah (for an act about which Scripture is vague - Gen 9:20-25). His descendants became an incredibly sinful people who practiced extreme cruelty, incest, idolatry, bestiality, homosexuality, and cultic prostitution. They offered their children as sacrifices. They pounded their drums, so parents would not hear how their children screamed when thrown into the fire to appease Moleck, the God of Canaanites (Jer 7:31).

After 400 years of iniquity the Canaanites had become so wicked that the Bible says the land vomited out its inhabitants (Lev 18:25).

God was concerned with sin, not ethnicity: Critics fail to acknowledge that the language used about the Canaanites is the same language used about Israel—just one indication that this is not "genocidal" (the extermination of an ethnic group).

God threatened to "vomit" out Israel from the land just as he had vomited out the Canaanites (Lev 18:25, Jer 25:9). It was not genocide but "sin-acide."

The judgment was intended to be expulsion from the land: There is a range of verbs used in the commands to Israel concerning how they should treat the Canaanites. Some of these clearly speak of extermination but others speak of *driving them out* (Deut 7). Deuteronomy 9:3 brings these two ideas together,

God's intention was that the Canaanites could flee the land as the Israelites advanced. As it happened, the Canaanite kings and citizens who refused to escape were annihilated by the Israelites.

If the Canaanites had left Canaan, the Israelites could have made treaties with them and would have been bound by the more general codes of conduct in warfare given in Deuteronomy 20. Their hostile occupation of the land of Canaan necessitated their forced removal. God's judgment was primarily that the Canaanites would lose the land because of their detestable practices, but it was their resistance to God's punishment that lead to their destruction.

The language of "totally wiping out and leaving no survivors" was a **hyperbole*** common in the ancient Near Eastern war accounts. This hyperbole may also be found in Old Testament passages like Joshua 10:40 or 1 Samuel 15 that describe entire cities being wiped. These expressions are not to be taken literally, as is seen from the references below.

- After commanding the Canaanites be destroyed the very next verse instructs the Israelites not to intermarry with them (Deut 7:3). How could you intermarry with people who are to be completely wiped out?
- The people who were allegedly wiped-out appear later in the story (Judges 1:21).
- Caleb later asked permission to drive out the supposedly annihilated Anakites from the hill country (Josh 14:12-15).
- Joshua's military campaign in Canaan was not a territorial conquest but a series of disabling raids, as [illegible] not military

God was patient with the Canaanites and gave them 400 years of warnings: This was no spur of the moment decision by God. In Genesis 15:13-16, God tells Abraham that his descendants will be slaves in a foreign country for 400 years but that they will return to the land of Canaan after "four generations." The reason given for this delay is because "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

The Canaanites could have repented, for they had some knowledge of the true God: This is evidenced by the following examples:

- Abraham lived among them and was a wealthy and powerful man (he was even able to rescue Lot from the united forces of four kings, according to Genesis 14). His faith in God should have been a witness to the Canaanites.
- The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (which were close to Canaanite territory) was evidence of God's judgment against sin (Gen 18-19).
- Melchizedek was King of Jerusalem and "priest of God Most High" (Gen 14:18). He must surely have taught his people about the true God (Gen 14:19).
- Even at the time of Joshua, the Canaanites had heard about what God had done for the Israelites in delivering them from Egypt and giving them victory over the Amorite kings east of the Jordan (Josh 2:8-12).

Over the many generations from Abraham to Joshua, the Canaanites had gradually rejected what they knew about God and moved deeper into sin.

It was only when their sin reached a certain level of severity that God decided to bring judgment on them, and to use the Israelites

The only Canaanites to be spared were the prostitute Rahab and her household, because she helped Israel in the attack on Jericho.

Rahab knew of Israel's victories and the blessings of God upon the nation. If she knew of Israel's fame, then it is reasonable to assume the rest of the city knew it as well. They could have easily escaped their destruction. However, they stubbornly chose to remain and fight against Israel instead.

God's judgment was also intended to prevent corruption of the Israelites: Israel, through whom the savior of the world was to come, needed to remain pure and completely removed from the wickedness of the Canaanites.

In Deuteronomy 20:16-18, when God commands the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites, the reason He gives is that, "Otherwise they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God."

God is the Author of Life: He authored all life and He can take it away whenever He deems appropriate. In fact, people never cease to exist—at death, they change locations. God is perfectly just to move you from this life to the next life at any time He chooses. "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7).

The Atheists' Dilemma

Back to the charge of the "New Atheists" about the immorality of God by annihilating the entire race of the Canaanites. On what basis do

If atheism is true and humans evolved from non-living, primordial slime, then any sense of moral obligation must simply be a subjective outworking of the physical neurons firing in the brain. Charles Darwin understood this truth perfectly.

He wrote, "A man who has no assured and ever-present belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence with retribution and reward, can have for his rule of life, as far as I can see, only to follow those *impulses and instincts* which are the strongest or which seem to him the best ones."[202]

While the atheist may claim not to like God's actions, if they admit that there is a legitimate standard of morality that is not based on subjective human whims, then they have forfeited their atheistic position. If actions can accurately be labeled as objectively moral or immoral, then atheism cannot be true.

An example of this can be found in atheists Richard Dawkins and Peter Singer's beliefs. They both believe that parents should have the right to kill their diseased children even after they are born.[203]

In his debate with John Rankin, Dan Barker said that abortion is a "blessing". One line of reasoning used by atheists to justify the practice is the idea that humans should not be treated differently than animals, since humans are nothing more than animals themselves.[204]

Sam Harris, famed atheist, wrote, "Many of us consider human fetuses in the first trimester to be more or less like rabbits; having imputed to them a range of happiness and suffering that does not grant them full status in our moral community."[205]

The atheist contends that human life can be taken by other humans based solely on reasoning about benefits to society and other relativistic ideas. The biblical position shows that God is the

God of Both Testaments

The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. We must note that the revelation of God in the Bible is *progressive*, and our understanding of God becomes clearer as the story of Scripture unfolds.

This is especially true when we consider the doctrine of the Trinity. The Old Testament barely mentions that God is Three Persons, yet One in essence. It was only with the coming of Christ that a profound truth like this could finally be made clear and that God's character and the extent of His love could fully be revealed in the New Testament.

It is a misreading of the text to suggest that God's love is unknown in the Old Testament. In fact, God's love to Israel is a major theme of the Old Testament, and His judgment of their enemies can even be an expression of this love. Likewise, it would be equally wrong to suggest that the God of the New Testament is not capable of righteous judgment.

The Old Testament presents God as the One who is both just and loving. Here are just three examples though there are many more:

- "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth" (Exod 34:6).
- "Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed" (Ps 85:10).
- "But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth" (Ps 86:15).

The perfect balance of the character of God as revealed in Christ:

- "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Final Thoughts

A careful examination of the Old Testament's incidents that atheists use to label God as unjust will show that these criticisms are unfounded, and their understanding of the various situations is flawed.

It is true that the Bible contains graphic stories of sin, evil, and death. But it is an overarching grand story of love, redemption, and grace. God tells us firmly we are in no position to criticize His acts of justice—but He kindly encourages us to come alongside Him and grieve over a world that has misused His gift of freedom.

He allows us to choose right or wrong, and laments when we choose wrong. When God acts in His righteousness, the world discovers that consequences exist for evil behavior, which is something the prophet Isaiah alluded to when he said, "For when Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness" (Isa 26:9).

Chapter 32 - Is the Bible Prejudiced Against Women (Misogynistic)?

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Is the Bible Prejudiced Against Women (Misogynistic)?

Misogyny means a hatred of women. The word is built from the Greek roots *misein* ("to hate") and *gynē* ("woman"). Misogynists treat women as morally or intellectually inferior to men. *Misogynistic* is the word Richard Dawkins, the famed atheist, used to describe the Old Testament God. Some feminists charge that Christianity, the Bible and the church are anti-female and horribly oppressive to women.

Does God Really Hate Women?

Those who claim that the Bible is misogynistic are misguided in interpreting certain passages in the Scriptures. They take verses out of their context and neglect the overall message being put forward. Most importantly, they force modern cultural conventions onto ancient cultures.

Ephesians 5:22-24 is a favorite target: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord." Critics claim that those words teach

them "as their own bodies," providing and caring for them just as Christ does.

And how much did Christ love the church? "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

The Scriptures tell us that all people are equal in the eyes of God, regardless of gender, race, or status.

- "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

The value of women, as noted in the New Testament, is *not* found in the Greco-Roman culture or the cultures of other societies. For example, Greek wives had virtually no freedom; men kept close tabs on them. The average woman had the social status of a slave. The wife could not divorce her husband whereas he could divorce her anytime. Boys were sent to school, taught to read and write, and educated in poetry, music and gymnastics; girls did not go to school at all. Throughout the woman's entire life, she was not permitted to speak in public. Women were also deemed inferior to men. The Greek poets were fond of equating her with evil.[206]

The status of Roman women was not any better. Roman law placed the wife under the total control of her husband, who had ownership of her and all her possessions. He could divorce her if she went out in public without a veil. A husband had the power of life and death over his wife, just as he did his children.[207]

New Testament Attitude Toward Women

The Lord Jesus respected women and treated them with dignity throughout the Bible:

- He rescued the adulterous woman from her accusers (John 8:9-11).
- He conversed in public with the Samaritan woman at the well, which was shockingly bold, and completely against the social norms of that day (John 4:9-10).
- God allowed it to be women who first found the empty tomb after Jesus' Resurrection and became the first preachers of it (Luke 24:1-10, Mark 16:2-8).
- The first people Jesus chose to appear to after His resurrection were women; not only that, but He told them to tell his disciples that He has risen from the dead (Matt 28, John 20). In a culture where a woman's testimony was worthless because she was perceived worthless, Jesus elevated the value of women far beyond anything the world had seen.

The early church not only attracted women followers, but many of them were instrumental in the proclamation of the gospel.

- "Therefore, many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men" (Acts 17:12).

All the Synoptic* Gospels (Mathew, Mark, and Luke) note that women followed Jesus, a highly unusual phenomenon in first-century Palestine. This behavior may not seem unusual today, but in Jesus' day, it was extremely uncommon.

Scholars note that in that culture only prostitutes would follow a man without a male escort.[208] These women were not groupies; some of them provided financial support for Jesus and the

Explaining Difficult Verses

Some verses, when taken out of context, seem difficult to understand. For example:

"But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ" (1 Cor 11:3).

- Headship is neither misogyny nor oppression. In Biblical theology, headship represents responsibility of leadership. Furthermore, if it is misogynistic to say that the man is the head of a woman, then what do they say about God the Father being the head of Christ? Does it mean that God the Father is superior to God the Son because He is His head? Of course not.[209]

"Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man" (1 Cor 11:9).

- Eve was created to work alongside Adam in his responsibilities of governing The Garden (Gen 2:18). This is not misogyny but a role that has its own power and responsibility. It has them working together to obey the commands of God.

"Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Pet 3:7).

- The "weaker vessel" refers to the generality that women typically have less physical strength than men.[210] But notice that a man is to *honor* his wife, and they are to be *heirs together*.

"Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says" (1 Cor 14:34).

- This verse refers to prohibiting women (usually uneducated in the culture of St. Paul's time) from asking disruptive questions. Such disruptive public questioning was considered a disgrace and morally indiscreet in that culture. This view of disruptive questioning fits well in the context of this passage in which St. Paul is concerned about orderly worship.

AND NOW?

Today, men and women in many countries have equal strength educationally, politically, professionally. Women in first world countries do not need to be literally protected as was necessary in many cultures over many centuries, and thought to be necessary in more recent times.

Although God in His great wisdom prepared Scripture that remains constant and true throughout all time, each book was written during specific times of human history. The events of the New Testament take place during the power of the Roman Empire, who occupied Jerusalem and the Near East.

We must be aware of the cultural context and social practices of that day. The fact that some of them don't sit well with us is to miss the point: Jesus came for us all.

Paul's teachings were somewhat progressive! So, let's return to the book of Ephesians. Before Paul tells wives their duty, before he tells husbands their duty, he tells us all: "Give thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus

Final Thoughts

Renowned English writer, poet, and Christian humanist, Dorothy Sayers, writes:

> "Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as He found them and was completely unselfconscious... Nobody could possibly guess from the words of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about woman's nature."[211]

Christianity does not oppress women. Christianity teaches that, though men and women are different in many ways and complementary to the core, they are of equal worth and dignity; and when the differences between them are recognized and appreciated, it is only then that all humanity will come to its fullest expression.

Chapter 33 - Does the Bible Condone Slavery?

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Does the Bible Condone Slavery?

Some think that the New Testament, like the Old, not only tolerated slavery but helped to perpetuate it by making the slaves' obedience to their masters a religious duty. Has the Bible been responsible for the oppression of slaves in the past? No, it has not. In fact, an in-depth study of the Scriptures reveals just the opposite.

It's Not the Civil War

It is extremely important that we first recognize our own understanding of slavery. The cotton plantations, the mistreated Africans, the economy built on suffering—it is all a disgraceful part of the history of the United States. Slaves were not only grossly mistreated, their owners sinfully used selected portions of Scripture to propagandize the slaves to believe God wanted them to be in servitude.

Americans can get "stuck" thinking that the way American slave traders and slave owners treated their slaves is how all other cultures and generations treated their slaves. Slavery in the U.S. was abusive slavery, but slavery was not necessarily abusive in other times and cultures (notwithstanding it deprived people of

cruel, that all slaves lived lives of toil and poverty, or that all slaves were uneducated, or that all slaves were...slaves.

Defining the "Slave" of the Bible

Kyle Butt in his article, *The Bible and Slavery*, says:

> "Frequently, 'slavery' in Bible times was much more of an employer / employee relationship than an owner / slave situation. Even the words used to delineate between a hired servant and a slave are difficult to separate. As Herbert Lockyer noted: In the ancient world, service and slavery were closely related, so much so that one can scarcely distinguish the one from the other. The original words used for 'servants' and 'service' carry a variety of meanings between which it is not always easy to determine what is meant. The Hebrew word *ebed* is like the Greek *doulos*, in that it can be translated as 'slave' or 'servant.' In Exodus 4:10, Moses referred to himself as the 'servant' (*ebed*) of God. Abraham called himself the *ebed* of the angels who came to visit him in Genesis 18:3. In Genesis 39:17-19, Potiphar's wife described Joseph as the Hebrew *ebed*, and Genesis 24:2 talks about the eldest *ebed* in Abraham's house, who 'ruled over all he had'."[212]

Although the Bible does not outlaw or even discourage slavery, it gives instructions on how slaves should be treated, such as:

- "If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the Lord your God has blessed you with, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your

God redeemed you; therefore, I command you this thing today" (Deut 15:12-15).

- "Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven" (Col 4:1).

Slavery in biblical times was not based strictly on race or nationality. It is based on the victor / vanquished situation, where those who lost a war became enslaved by the winners. It could have also come about from economic hardship, where people needed to sell themselves into slavery to pay off debts.

Often the arrangement was mutually beneficial, like an employer / employee relationship. Job describes this relationship quite well:

- "If I have despised the cause of my male or female servant when they complained against me, what then shall I do when God rises up? When He punishes, how shall I answer Him? Did not the same One fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:13-15).

Slavery in the New Testament

Debt slavery was still a very real form of restitution in New Testament times.[213] In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus told a story about a servant who owed his master the equivalent of many thousands of dollars.

Perhaps this man had become a servant due to this enormous debt or was being kept a servant because of the debt.

This [illegible] cannot be used to argue that God is unjust

Final Thoughts

Everyone is a slave to something—drugs, sex, alcohol, pessimism, malicious gossip, or any number of other vices. As St. Paul wrote through inspiration:

- "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness" (Rom 6:16-18).

We each must decide which master we will allow to control our lives. As the psalmist so beautifully stated it,

- "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Ps 84:10).

God's injunctions and instructions pertaining to slavery have a clear ring of justice, compassion, mercy and kindness to them.

When analyzed fairly and fully, the idea of slavery gives the honest person one more piece of evidence that points to the perfection of the God of the Bible.[214]