

Is the God of the Old Testament a Merciless Monster?

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ABSTRACT: Non-Christians sometimes assert that God is portrayed in the Old Testament as a cruel and ruthless deity that indiscriminately orders the execution of seemingly innocent men, women, and children, or directly carries out their deaths by various means. Such a God, the argument goes, in no way represents the loving Creator or Father figure that the New Testament offers, and should in no way be worshipped or venerated. However, a closer examination of Yahweh in the Old Testament refutes the charge of the Creator being a tyrant and instead reveals a righteous, patient, merciful, and loving God who does indeed mirror the picture painted by Jesus and the rest of the New Testament writers.

Introduction

In his book *The God Delusion*, atheist Richard Dawkins writes a scathing rendition of God as he sees Him in the Old Testament. Dawkins says: “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 Such words are echoed by atheist Charles Templeton who states: “The God of the Old Testament is utterly unlike the God believed in by most practicing Christians ... His justice is, by modern standards, outrageous.... He is biased, querulous, vindictive, and jealous of his prerogatives.”²

What is it in the Old Testament that elicits such strong language from Dawkins and Templeton who want nothing to do with God? What causes others like Thomas Paine to write: “Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the work of a demon, than the word of God.”³

Are such portrayals of God accurate? Does the Old Testament paint a picture of God as nothing more than a cosmic bully with a hair trigger who is ready to torture or end the lives of anyone who so much as neglects a seemingly small request of Heaven?

The answers to these questions are critical because Christians today are quick to tell unbelievers about a God of love who is patient, forgiving, and slow to anger. In fact, Jesus Himself describes God as a tender Father who loves His children and creation, and someone who longs for His prodigal to come home rather than desiring the lost son’s demise. Was Jesus just wrong? Did the Son of God miss what Dawkins, Templeton, Paine, and others see in the Old Testament writings? Is there a disconnect between what Christians profess about God vs. what is actually recorded in the first thirty-nine books of the Bible?

This paper takes a look at the assertions by Christianity’s critics that the God of the Old Testament is nothing more than a merciless monster. To adequately address the issue, a survey of key examples in the Old Testament used by critics to back up their case will first be performed. Because of the brevity of this work, not all cases can be examined; however care will be taken to not omit any of the major/common illustrations used by opponents to label God as cruel and unjust.

Afterwards, each surveyed example will be examined in detail to understand the situation in a more exact manner so that an informed decision can be made for each as to whether the

¹Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Great Britain: Bantam Press, 2006, 31.

²Charles Templeton, *Farewell to God*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999, 71.

³Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason*, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, 1944, 18.

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critic's charge against God still sticks. Once this has been completed, a quick study will be given to how atheists and other skeptics can justify their moral stances in the absence of any absolute moral standard. Finally, some conclusions from the previous sections will be provided in hopes of providing a summary of arguments that showcase why the God of the Old Testament is no different than the One represented by Jesus and evangelical Christians today.

A Brief Look at Some Old Testament Examples

The adversaries of God's depiction in the Old Testament point to a number of Biblical references that seem to portray the Creator in a bad light. For example, front and center in their arguments is the Genesis flood that erased all life from earth except for one particular family: "Behold, I [God], even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish." (Gen. 6:17). From this verse, it is crystal clear that it is God Himself who is choosing to cause the deaths of untold numbers of men, women, and children.

Later in Genesis is found the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and all its people via a direct supernatural act of God: "Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground" (Gen. 19:24-25).

Charges of genocide are very common among the critics of God, with Israel's charge of what to do with existing people in the promised land being called out as an example: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, and when the Lord your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, **then you shall utterly destroy them**. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them" (Deut. 7:1-2, emphasis added). To the skeptic, it seems plain that God is ordering the deaths of innocent people whose only crime is living in the land that He wants Israel to possess. This is reiterated several chapters later in the same Old Testament book: "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 them**, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the Lord your God has commanded you" (Deut. 20:16-17, emphasis added).

Critics also point to the overthrow of Jericho and the violent nature of how it was carried out: "They [Israel] utterly destroyed everything in the city [Jericho], both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword" (Joshua 6:21). The seemingly merciless nature of God's similar forms of extermination is also decried in God's command to Saul in the Old Testament to wipe out the people of Amalek: "Now go and strike Amalek and **utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man**

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and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." (1 Sam. 15:3, emphasis added). Why, the critic asks, did the children and even animals have to be killed in the Jericho and Saul campaigns? Certainly such treatment appears extreme and ruthless, doesn't it? Referencing such events, Robert Anton Wilson states: "The Bible tells us to be like God, and then on page after page it describes God as a mass murderer."⁴

In addition to these examples, various Old Testament personalities – ones who God seemingly approved of and helped – are targeted by the Bible's detractors. For example, in the book of Judges, the story of Samson is relayed, including an episode where Samson is about to be married and makes a bet with thirty men who are to be part of the event. After he loses the bet and is forced to make good on it (he must provide thirty sets of clothes to them), Samson goes down to Ashkelon and kills thirty 'innocent' men for their garments: "Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon him mightily, and he went down to Ashkelon and killed thirty of them and took their spoil and gave the changes of clothes to those who told the riddle. And his anger burned, and he went up to his father's house" (Judges 14:19). As can be seen in the first part of the verse, God's Spirit enables Samson to carry out this act – how could such a thing be empowered by a God of mercy and love asks the critic?

Not only are acts such as the above held out as examples of ruthlessness by those disapproving of God's behavior, they also incredulously point to what they consider extremely barbaric and harsh penalties instituted by God. For example, a case in point is the punishment for a disobedient son: "If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. They shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.' **Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death;** so you shall remove the evil from your midst" (Deut. 21:18-21, emphasis added).

Another example often cited is the killing of a man for violating the Sabbath as recorded in the book of Numbers: "Now while the sons of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation; and they put him in custody because it had not been declared what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, "**The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.**" **So all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, just as the Lord had commanded Moses"** (Num. 15:32-36, emphasis added). As can be seen, the verse ends with the endorsement of God being on the Sabbath breaker's execution. Such examples cause atheist like George Smith to comment: "The Old Testament God garnered an impressive list of atrocities. Jehovah himself was fond of directly exterminating large numbers of people, usually through pestilence or famine, and often for rather unusual offenses."⁵

⁴<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/25755>.

⁵George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, New York: Prometheus Books, 1980, 77.

A Response to Critics' Objections

From the above examples, it would seem that those questioning God's justice, love, and mercy have a fairly solid position in their complaints. However, let's now dig a little deeper into each example and see if there isn't more to each story than what appears on the surface when single sets of verses are clipped from the text and used to attack the character of God.

The Genesis Flood

In Genesis 6, God's judgment upon the world at large is found in these words: "The Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky; for I am sorry that I have made them"" (Gen. 6:7). While the universal flood certainly seems extreme on the surface, there are a number of factors that should be kept in mind.

First, the Bible makes it clear that violence and evil had grown to be extremely pervasive so that it literally touched everything and everyone that existed at that time. Genesis 6:5 states: "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." The author of the Pentateuch indicates that some of the sin was sexual in nature (cf. Gen. 6:1-2), and that the evil permeated and filled the earth. This erases the argument that God drowned 'innocent' people in the flood that He brought.

Next, during the construction of the ark, which lasted at least 100 years, Noah is described as a 'preacher of righteousness' (cf. 2 Pet. 2:5) to the people around him. This means the people had 100 or so years to listen to the message of Noah and repent of the sin that was bringing the flood waters upon them. However, evidently there were no changed minds during that time as, in the end, it was only Noah and his family that were spared. Rather than possessing a short fuse as God is sometimes described by atheists as having, the Bible indicates that God actually had great patience with the evil that was before Him while the ark was being built (cf. 1 Pet 3:20).

So in the end, we find God using His messenger to proclaim the truth of repentance and judgment before a fully corrupt culture that refused to be moved even after 100 years of being exposed to it. And we find God's mercy being displayed on the one family who followed and obeyed what God had commanded.

Sodom and Gomorrah

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is covered in Genesis 19, however what is oftentimes overlooked are the mentions of those two cities in Genesis prior to their judgment. In Genesis 13, Abraham and his nephew Lot separate from one another because their flocks had grown too large for the land they both lived in. Lot chose to move into an area Genesis describes as “like the garden of the Lord (Gen. 13:10), which was the area of Sodom. In spite of the wickedness that already existed in the city (cf. Gen. 13:13), God still blessed the land in which they were living, illustrating what is sometimes called His common grace, which causes His rain to fall on the just and unjust (cf. Matt. 5:45).

God had provided a wonderful land for the people of Sodom to live in. But God also provided for their rescue from harm as well as spiritual instruction. Genesis 14 chronicles the story of Sodom and Gomorrah’s war, initial defeat, and plunder by rival kings, but then also details how Abraham rescued Lot who had been taken captive as well as others who had been with him. It also speaks about how Melchizedek came out to meet the king of Sodom as well as Abraham who he blessed. From this it seems plausible to believe that the people of that land had been exposed to God’s truth by Melchizedek and perhaps others for about 25 years.

But even though they lived in a land blessed by God, were rescued from enemies by God’s servant, and had been given spiritual truth by God’s priest, the people chose to live sinfully before their Creator. Genesis 13:13 says, “Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord.” Later, in Genesis 18, the Bible records God as declaring, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave (Gen. 18:20).

Yet, the writer of Genesis then details an interesting conversation between God and Abraham. As God contemplates carrying out judgment against the cities, Abraham asks if God would dare destroy good people with the bad. He then begins to whittle down a hypothetical number of good people left in the city of Sodom, starting with fifty and ending with ten, asking after each amount if God would still destroy the city if that particular number of good people resided within its walls. In the end, God says He would not destroy the city if He could find at least ten good people within it.

But in Genesis 19, two angels come into the city and are sheltered by Lot. The Scripture then says this: “Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, ***both young and old, all the people from every quarter***; and they called to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them” (Gen. 19:4-5, emphasis added). The writer is careful to note that the evil men were both young and old and came from everywhere. Evidently the required ten righteous men could not be found and God acted in judgment upon the evil culture. Lot and his family, however, are rescued from the coming judgment and escape it.

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The account of Sodom and Gomorrah, which culminates in the encounter involving Lot, the angels, and the men of the city is a vivid description of the type of pervasive evil that causes God to act after He blesses circumstances, rescues from harm, and gives spiritual guidance. The New Testament refers to the destruction of these cities as an example of judgment yet to come (cf. 2 Peter 2.6) with the sexual perversion aspect of the sin being specifically cited (cf. Jude 7).

The Destruction of Jericho

Critics of God's actions in the Old Testament specifically cite the following verse as a perfect example of 'overkill' in how God dealt with Israel's enemies: "They [Israel] utterly destroyed everything in the city [Jericho], both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword" (Joshua 6:21). How, they ask, could God look with approval on the death of women and young people? Richard Dawkins, chronicling what he believes to be crimes committed by God, says that the taking of Jericho is "morally indistinguishable from Hitler's invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein's massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs."⁶ Is this really the case?

The answer to that question, and the overall justification for the destruction of Jericho, becomes more clear when one does a little research on the Canaanites who populated the city. Canaan, who was a descendant of Ham (cf. Gen. 10:6), was cursed by Noah for an act that Scripture is not too clear about (cf. Gen. 9:20-25). His descendants became an incredibly sinful people who practiced extreme cruelty, incest, idolatry, bestiality, homosexuality, cultic prostitution, and child sacrifice (by throwing their own children into altars of fire). God warned Israel to not mimic Canaan's ways: "When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer" (Deut. 18:9-10).

And yet, unfortunately, Scripture records that Israel failed to remove Canaan fully from the land given to her by God and suffered the consequences of their disobedience: "They did not destroy the peoples, as the Lord commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and learned their practices, and served their idols, which became a snare to them. They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons, and shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and their daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with the blood. Thus they became unclean in their practices, and played the harlot in their deeds" (Psalm 106:36-39).

The consequences of not removing such a people from the land God gave Israel was seen very clearly in the Psalmist's words, so there is no need to wonder 'what if' with respect to allowing

⁶Dawkins, 247.

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the Canaanites to remain in Jericho. Only a complete removal would do, with even the animals needing to be killed, likely due to the practice of bestiality.

The only ones saved were the prostitute Rahab and her household, which helped Israel in the attack on Jericho. This is an interesting point in that 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 Israel instead.

The Judgment against Amalek

The book of 1 Samuel contains the account of God's orders for Saul to destroy the people of Amalek. The Amalekites were descended from Amalek (whose name means 'plunderer'), who was the son of Eliphaz and grandson of Esau. They were a wicked and warlike people and were the first to oppose Israel after her liberation from Egypt (cf. Exodus 17:8). As descendants of Esau, they were likely aware of God's promises to Jacob, but rather than honor God's choice of Israel, they instead elected to be their enemy.

The Amalekites were particularly cowardly in their attacks on Israel and would deliberately murder the weak and elderly who sometimes lagged behind the core group of Israelites who were making their way to the land promised them by God (cf. Deut. 25:17-19). The book of Judges (6:3-5) records that they consistently allied themselves with other nations to commit genocide against Israel.

Amazingly, God chose not to destroy the Amalekites until some 400 years had elapsed from their first sinful acts against His people. Such an incredibly long period of time shows the patience of God and dispels any notion that God is quick tempered and rushes to judgment against those who are sinning before Him.

Scripture also contains God's warnings to the Kenites, who were a people living among the Amalekites, to depart so they would not be caught up in the coming judgment (cf. 1 Sam. 15:6). Such a warning had to have also been heard by the Amalekites and it is reasonable to assume they could have fled the land as well, however they chose not to.

Although God commanded Saul to completely destroy the Amalekites, he disobeyed and did not completely do as he was told (cf. 1 Sam. 15:9-26). Some were allowed to live, an outcome that ultimately resulted in another attempt of genocide upon Israel. The book of Esther records that a man named Haman – who was of Amalek descent – tried to have all the Jews killed in the land of Persia, but he was ultimately stopped by Queen Esther herself.

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Samson and the Sons of Ashkelon

Bible naysayers decry Samson's murder of 30 men of Ashkelon descent, which is recorded in Judges 14:19. However, they overlook a number of important things.

First, Ashkelon was a city of the Philistines, a people who persistently oppressed and brutalized Israel. The Philistines were notorious for their idol worship and worshiped the false gods Dagon, Ashtoreth (the spouse of the false god Baal), and Baalzebub. The rituals of Ashtoreth typically included temple prostitution.

The thirty 'companions' of Samson were of Ashkelon descent and clearly lived up to their reputation for violence and cruelty. When challenged by Samson's riddle and bet, they threatened to murder his fiancée and destroy her father's home by fire if she did not get Samson to reveal the riddle's answer to them (which she did).

The acts that Samson carried out were simply an act of judgment by God upon the people of Ashkelon, and are part of a larger sweeping story of God using Samson (and others) as His weapons of justice against a blasphemous and evil people. The story of Samson ends with him killing thousands of Philistines by causing the building they were in to collapse. Samson was also killed in the act, although he himself was saved by God as evidenced by the fact that he is recorded in the 'heroes of faith' section in Hebrews 11 (cf. vs. 32).

The Story of Nineveh

The account of the city of Nineveh as recorded in the books of Jonah and Nahum stands as a testimony to the patience and forgiveness of God, as well as His justice. The story of Jonah is a familiar one – Jonah is sent by God to the people of Nineveh to command them to repent of their sin before God or they will face certain judgment. Instead of obeying God, Jonah boards a ship heading in the complete opposite direction of Nineveh. However, God brings about a storm that results in Jonah being thrown overboard and uncomfortably transported to Nineveh via a great fish.

When one understands the background and people of Nineveh, it becomes somewhat understandable why Jonah would not want to visit that city and assist in them escaping God's judgment. The city of Nineveh, the ancient capital of Assyria, was populated by the Assyrians who were an incredibly barbaric people. When archaeologists uncovered Nineveh, the TV documentaries that showcased the findings had to be filtered because the evidence of the people's brutality was so great. As an example, the Assyrians used to torture and kill their victims by slowly impaling and sliding them down sharp poles. They would also fillet people and make handbags from their skins. In a stone pillar found at the site of Nineveh, one Assyrian ruler boasted of "nobles I flayed" and went on to say "Three thousand captives I burned with fire. I left not one hostage alive. I cut off the hands and feet of some. I cut off the noses, ears

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and fingers of others. The eyes of numerous soldiers I put out. Maidens I burned as a holocaust". Through the examples obtained via archaeology, it is easy to compile a fairly good portrayal of the type of people that inhabited the city, which yields a solid understanding of why God would send His prophet to them preaching repentance and judgment.

And yet, the book of Jonah is a demonstration of God's grace and forgiveness even to such a brutal people. Through the preaching of Jonah, the people repented of their sins and were forgiven by God. When Jonah objected to God showing kindness and grace to the people, God said to him: "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?" (Jonah 4:11). Despite their great wickedness, God spared them.

Sadly, though, Nineveh reverted back to their ways years later, and this time, no offer of repentance was extended. Instead, the book of Nahum (and Zephaniah) records a simple declaration of judgment that came. God brought the Babylonians and Medes to destroy the city in 612 B.C. Archaeologist David Stronach of the University of California at Berkeley speaks to the desolation that scientists found when they uncovered Nineveh: "I've never seen anything like this mass of tangled bodies with weapons in the midst of them. The desperation of the defense is now manifest."

The account of Nineveh stands as an excellent example of how God deals with sin: He is slow to anger and always warns of the consequences that come from living wickedly before Him. And, although He is quick to forgive, being a God of justice and righteousness, He will most certainly bring judgment against those who continually ignore Him and continue down a path of sinful living.

A Discernable Pattern

From the above examples, we see a distinct pattern emerging from the judgments brought by God upon various peoples:

1. God declares an annihilation form of judgment to stamp out a cancer
2. The judgments are for public recognition of extreme sin
3. Judgment is preceded by warning and/or long periods of exposure to the truth and time to repent
4. Any and all 'innocent' adults are given a way of escape with their families; sometimes all given a way to avoid judgment via repentance or leaving a particular region. It should also be noted that expulsion from a land was the most common judgment, not extermination. This pattern goes all the way back to the ejection of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen. 3:24)
5. Someone is almost always saved (redeemed) from the evil culture
6. The judgment of God falls

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This outline is found again and again in the Old Testament. Far from being innocent, the objects of God's judgments were involved in gross sin and committed acts of great barbarism such as ritualistically burning their own children to death as offerings to their false gods. Amazingly, instead of immediately destroying the peoples involved in such things, the actual opposite is found: the Scripture conveys that God had incredible patience and waited until the full measure of their deeds were completed. For example, while speaking to Abraham about the future exodus of Israel from Egypt, God says the following about the Amorite people: "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete" (Gen 15:15).

One has to ask if mankind today would be as long-suffering with such horrible deeds? Were such acts as those chronicled in the Old Testament catapulted into the twenty-first century and globally broadcast via CNN, there would no doubt be a universal outcry with military action being prescribed if such actions were not immediately halted. Why, then, do God's critics feel justified in labeling the Creator as morally unjust even when God waited in some cases for centuries to punish the peoples involved?

No Double Standard

Atheist Christopher Hitchens, speaking about the ejection of the Canaanites from their land, says they were "pitilessly driven out of their homes to make room for the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel."⁷ As stated earlier, the peoples who experienced God's judgments were far from measuring up to the critic's description of being innocent. The reasons for Israel displacing the evil nations who were living in the land promised to Israel by God is clearly stated in Scripture. Speaking to Israel, God says: "Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them [the people in the land] out before you, 'Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' but ***it is because of the wickedness of these nations*** that the Lord is dispossessing them before you. It is ***not for your righteousness*** or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is ***because of the wickedness of these nations*** that the Lord your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Deut. 9:4-5; see also Deut. 18:9-12 and Lev. 18:24-25).

It should be understood that this was not a one-way street; God held Israel to the same standard and prescribed the same judgment when they fell into sin: "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. ***And if you defile the***

⁷Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007, 101.

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land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. Everyone who does any of these detestable things -- such persons must be cut off from their people" (Lev. 18.24-29; see also Lev 20.22).

Anyone familiar with the story of Israel in the Old Testament knows this happened. Just as Israel was used as a tool of God's judgment against various sinful nations, in like fashion, God used kingdoms such as Babylon against Israel when they rejected God and worshipped false gods and idols. There was no double standard used by God whatsoever; the same righteous benchmark was applied to all regardless of who they were.

What About the Killing of Children?

Critics still point to the killing of children in a number of the accounts listed above (e.g. the Flood, Amalek, etc.) and protest that God was not justified in calling for the taking of their lives. To address this charge, a number of things should be understood.

First, the typical Israeli rules of engagement included a warning and declaration period of the coming, impending war. Women, children, the elderly, and others who wished could easily flee far ahead of the fully announced military attack. Only those who (or whose parents) stubbornly remained would face war and its outcome.

Second, in the case of Amalek, it has already been shown that the entire culture had been corrupted by the sin of the adults. From the perspective of eternity, there was no hope for any child who was left behind. Scripture speaks to the fact that any child who dies before they know enough to be morally accountable before God are taken to be with Him (cf. 2 Sam. 12:23), so while some children may have been killed in war, they were ultimately saved by God from becoming what their parents were.

Lastly, socially and physically, the fate of children throughout history has always rested with their parents whether they were in good hands (in the case of Noah) or bad (Amalek). The actions of the parents were the final determinant in the temporal/earthly well-being of the children.

A Look at Old Testament Prescriptions for Punishment

What about some of the Old Testament punishments such as the prescription for stoning a child who disobeyed their parents (cf. Deut 21:18-21) or someone who broke the Sabbath law (cf. Exodus 35:2)? As for the stoning of a disobedient child, it should be noted that the Bible spells out the fact that parents are the earthly representatives of God, so any disobedience was actually a vertical rather than horizontal act.

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That said, it is important to note that the actual taking of a life could be suspended if a ransom was paid for the individual instead (cf. Num. 35:31). This could be done for everything except the crime of murder. There were also stringent rules for carrying out the punishment; for example, the family could not carry out the execution by themselves, but instead had to take the case to the elders of the people who examined the case. Even so, there is never a single case recorded in Scripture of the penalty being carried out. Perhaps this is because the prescribed punishment had its intended effect: to ensure parental respect via fear. Deuteronomy 13:11, 17:13, and 21:21 say nearly exactly the same thing after a prescribed punishment has been stated: "Then all Israel will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such a wicked thing among you."

However, while there is not a mention of the death sentence being carried out for parental disobedience, the Bible does record capital punishment being instituted for a Sabbath breaker: "Now while the sons of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation; and they put him in custody because it had not been declared what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, "The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp." So all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, just as the Lord had commanded Moses" (Num. 15:32-36). Isn't this a bit extreme?

What is sometimes overlooked is the passage of Scripture that immediately precedes this account: "But when you ***unwittingly fail*** and do not observe all these commandments . . . Then the priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and they will be forgiven; for it was an error, and they have brought their offering, an offering by fire to the Lord, and their sin offering before the Lord, for their error . . . Also if one person sins unintentionally, then he shall offer a one year old female goat for a sin offering. The priest shall make atonement before the Lord for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, making atonement for him that he may be forgiven. ***You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them. But the person who does anything defiantly, whether he is native or an alien, that one is blaspheming the Lord;*** and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt will be on him" (Num. 15:22-31, emphasis added).

The lesson being clearly taught in Scripture is that the account of the Sabbath breaker in Numbers 15:32-36 is that he was a defiant lawbreaker, in open rebellion towards God, and knew he was in the wrong.

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The Harsh Reality of the Bible

One last criticism thrown at the Old Testament is that it contains many stories of person-to-person brutality, dishonesty, sexual immorality, greed, and other similar items. How, asks the skeptic, could God approve of such things and allow them to be in His inspired Word?

The answer is, He doesn't endorse such things. One has to remember that, although the Bible records many sordid events, that doesn't mean God approves of them. And indeed, many of the Old Testament personalities exhibit behavior that leaves much to be desired. For example, in Genesis 19, Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the men of the city that came to his door and demanded to have sexual relations with the angels who came to visit Lot. Such an offer is certainly abhorrent, and never is the act given a thumb's up by the author of Genesis or any inspired author throughout the rest of the Bible.

This being the case, it is important to remember that the Bible does not approve of everything it records. And one must also keep in mind that God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick. Abraham (who lied about Sarah being his wife), David (who committed murder and adultery), and others never have their sin obscured in the pages of Scripture, which is a testimony to the sinfulness of all people and the grace that God extends to them. Despite their sin, God loved and used them as part of His overall plan of salvation.

The Non-Existent Moral Foundation of Atheism

Having now responded to the main charges against God's justice as seen in the Old Testament, we next turn our attention to how the atheist attempts to back up their moral position of labeling God as evil and unjust in the first place. What set of ethics or philosophy do they use as their foundation?

The materialist/naturalist cannot turn to evolution for help as it only offers the concept of survival of the fittest. In that framework, the belief that only the strong survive and might makes right serves as no underpinning at all for their moral position.

It becomes difficult for the atheist who wishes to be true to their philosophy to cast a disapproving eye at God without dipping their toe into the moral groundwork of Christianity, which they say they reject. This is why some atheists have openly admitted that in their world, good and evil really are not concepts that a person can grab hold of. On this subject, Richard Dawkins says: "Humans have always wondered about the meaning of life . . . life has no higher purpose than to perpetuate the survival of DNA. . . life has no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference."⁸

⁸Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden*, New York: Basic Books, 1995, 133.

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How can such a statement be made? It actually is the end result of taking the atheist philosophy and following it to where it ends. The basic logic flows as follows: Before you can call something evil, you have to know what good is. Before you know what good is, you have to have a moral framework to distinguish good from evil. Before you can have a moral framework, you have to have absolute and unchanging moral laws to build your framework (else you will always be in doubt if your 'good' is really good). Before you can have absolute and unchanging moral laws, you have to have an absolute moral law giver, because laws don't appear from thin air. But such an absolute moral law giver: that would be God, the one the atheist denies. So you now begin to simply rewind: no absolute moral law giver means no absolute moral laws. No absolute moral laws means no moral framework to distinguish between good and evil. And no moral framework means there is no way to label something good and something else evil. The thought is put more simply by C.S. Lewis who said that a man cannot call a line crooked unless he knows what a straight line looks like.

This being true, where does the atheist turn for their 'straight line'? God is out of the question, so they must turn to mankind itself, which they believe is inherently 'good'. But the thorny question for atheists, given their denial of God and a belief that mankind is basically good, is: *Who, then, committed all the 'atrocities' they point to in the Old Testament?* God did not do it since He does not exist and if people are basically good, then what went wrong with those involved in all the incidents they decry?

"Religion!" is the answer that most times comes back from the atheist. They charge that the violence carried out was caused by people who falsely used a religious justification to give them a green light to commit the acts that they did. But does such a position stand firm? Sometimes it does; for example, the 9/11 terrorists were religiously motivated and firmly believed that what they were doing was right before the eyes of Allah.

However, the atheist ignores that fact that non-religious governments have far and away committed more bloodshed than any governing body that uses religion as its undergirding. In this book *Death by Government*, R. J. Rummel records the following body count⁹ resulting from atheist/non-religious governments:

- Joseph Stalin 42,672,000
- Mao Zedong 37,828,000
- Adolf Hitler 20,946,000
- Chiang Kai-shek 10,214,000
- Vladimir Lenin 4,017,000
- Hideki Tojo 3,990,000
- Pol Pot 2,397,000

⁹R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government*, Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009, 8.

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Rummel says, "Almost 170 million men, women and children have been shot, beaten, tortured, knifed, burned, starved, frozen, crushed or worked to death; buried alive, drowned, hung, bombed or killed in any other of a myriad of ways governments have inflicted death on unarmed, helpless citizens and foreigners. . . . It is as though our species has been devastated by a modern Black Plague. And indeed it has, but a plague of Power, not of germs."¹⁰ It should be kept in mind that the statistics quoted in Rummel's work were as of 1988; since then, there have been numerous more wars and atrocities by secular governments that have added to the death count.

This is the atheist's dilemma: where do they turn for an answer to the violence Rummel cites and what is their remedy for the situation? What moral standard and authority will they use to make things right? They cannot turn to evolution and/or naturalism as survival of the fittest does not respect or believe in moral equality among human beings. Frederick Nietzsche affirms this when he says, "Equality is a lie concocted by inferior people who arrange themselves in herds to overpower those who are naturally superior to them. The morality of 'equal rights' is a herd morality, and because it opposes the cultivation of superior individuals, it leads to the corruption of the human species." It was also Nietzsche who predicted that, because God (he believed) was now dead, the 20th century would be the bloodiest century in history. Sadly, he was right, with the outcome echoing Dostoevsky's statement made in his book *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Without God all things are permitted."

The situation is indeed a difficult one for the atheist. On one hand they call the God of the Old Testament evil, and yet on the other, they admit that without God evil does not exist and anything goes. Atheists would do well to listen to N. T. Wright in his lengthy but helpful recommendation that they (or anyone) not be quick in casting a judgmental eye toward God's actions in the Old Testament:

We find it hard to believe that they [Israel] were justified in doing what they did to the Canaanites, or that the God who was involved in this operation was the same God we know in Jesus Christ. And yet ever since the garden, ever since God's grief over Noah, ever since Babel and Abraham, the story has been about the messy way in which God has had to work to bring the world out of the mess. Somehow, in a way we are inclined to find offensive, God has to get his boots muddy and, it seems, to get his hands bloody, to put the world back to rights. If we declare, as many have done, that we would rather it were not so, we face a counter-question: Which bit of dry, clean ground are we standing on that we should pronounce on the matter with such certainty? Dietrich Bonhoeffer declared that the primal sin of humanity consisted in putting the knowledge of good and evil before the knowledge of God. That is one of the further dark mysteries of Genesis 3: there must be some substantial continuity between what we mean by good and evil and what God means; otherwise we are in moral darkness indeed. But it serves as a warning to us not to pontificate with too much certainty about what God should and shouldn't have done.¹¹

¹⁰Ibid, 9.

¹¹N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2006, 58-59.

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The thrust of Wright's statement centers on a rebuttal against anyone who considers God *unjust*, which is the exact sentiment of God's detractors when they give surface level attention to His actions in the Old Testament. And yet, without God, there can be no true justice.

This was a conclusion arrived at even by one of history's most famous thinkers who, though he believed there was a God, didn't think a person could really know Him: Immanuel Kant. Kant asked the question, what would it take to have real justice? Kant first saw that in this life, the innocent do indeed suffer and the unjust prosper; in other words, an argument could be made that in this world there is no practical reason to be ethical: crime pays. So because this world shows that justice doesn't always prevail, to have true justice, there must be life after death for the unjust to be brought to account. Is that enough, asked Kant? No, there must also be a judgment. Moreover, that judgment must be perfect to ensure justice is meted out. And, for there to be perfect justice and a perfect judgment, it is reasonable to conclude that there must be a perfect judge; one that must know all the facts of the case and possess all knowledge so nothing is left to chance. Is that then sufficient, wondered Kant? No, the judge must be also be completely righteous, because a judge can know all the facts and yet be corrupt. Further, the judge must also have the power to implement and enforce the justice, with no power being superior to his so nothing is left to chance.

So, although Kant firmly believed the Bible was not the revealed Word of God, he had reached the conclusion that to have true justice you need an afterlife with an omnipotent, omniscient, righteous, and holy Judge to ensure justice is carried out. Without that, Kant said, there is no firm foundation or grounds for ethics or justice. Kant's conclusion was simply that mankind must live as if there is a God.

Conclusion

After carefully examining the chief Old Testament examples that atheists use to label God as unjust, it has been demonstrated that their criticisms and characterizations are unfounded, and their understanding of the various situations flawed. Further, rather than living up to Dawkin's caricature of being a vindictive, impatient, quick-tempered, and bloodthirsty deity, the image of God that instead emerges from the Old Testament after a thorough study has been made is just the opposite; God is portrayed as forgiving, patient, and slow to bring forth judgment. However, He is also revealed to be a holy, just, and righteous God who will bring justice about in His time. In short, the God of the Old Testament matches the God of the New Testament to a tee.

While some may argue that correcting the skeptic's faulty view of God is not that important, quite the opposite is true. An accurate understanding of the nature and characteristics of God is paramount; a fact captured well by A. W. Tozer who writes: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably

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show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God."¹²

It is true that the Bible contains graphic stories of sin, evil, and death. But it also includes the overarching, grand story of love, redemption, and grace. It showcases a God who asks us to not criticize Him about His acts of justice, but instead One who kindly encourages us to come alongside Him and grieve over a world that has misused the gift of freedom given it to do wrong instead of right. When that happens, and God acts in His righteousness, the world discovers that consequences exist for evil behavior, which is something the prophet Isaiah speaks to: "At night my soul longs for You, Indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently; for when the earth experiences Your judgments the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness" (Isaiah 26:9).

So is the God of the Old Testament a merciless monster? After a thorough review of the facts, the evidence overwhelmingly demands an answer of 'no'.

¹²A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1961, 1.