

GOD
BEHAVING
BADLY

EXPANDED EDITION

*Is the God of the
Old Testament Angry,
Sexist and Racist?*

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A BAD REPUTATION

How does one reconcile the loving God of the Old Testament with the harsh God of the New Testament?

When I ask this question of students, at first they are shocked, and then most assume that I have simply misspoken, as I am prone to do. They typically have heard the question inverted, along these lines: “How did the mean Old Testament God morph into a nice guy like Jesus?” I assure them that this time, at least, I have not accidentally inverted my words. I then observe that God in the Old Testament is consistently described as slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,¹ but Jesus speaks about hell more than anyone else in Scripture.² The word *hell* doesn’t even show up in English translations of the Old Testament.

My question usually provokes a lively discussion. Eventually I assure the class that I believe that the God of both the Old and the New Testaments can be characterized by love. This book is my attempt to reconcile the supposedly contradictory portrayals of God in the two testaments, but first let me explain how I ended up teaching about the loving God of the Old Testament.

More than ten years ago, I had to decide whether to focus on

the Old Testament or the New Testament for study and teaching. It was one of the most important decisions of my life. I love the whole Bible, and it was painful to think about just focusing on one section of it. I thought perhaps I should select the New Testament, because my favorite book was Mark's Gospel, and I had spent more time teaching it than any other section of Scripture. But then I hesitated because the world of New Testament studies seemed crowded. Finding an available New Testament research topic felt like looking for a parking space in the Target lot on Christmas Eve (not that I would have any personal experience of that). It would have been difficult for me to come up with fresh ideas that weren't heretical.

So I considered the Old Testament. If I focused on the Old Testament, I wouldn't have to worry about bumping into someone else working on the same obscure half-verse. I also didn't need to be quite so paranoid about heresy, because we expect to find weird stuff in the Old Testament.

But the most compelling factor drawing me toward studying the Old Testament was God himself. The God of the Old Testament was fascinating to me. He became really angry, but was also extraordinarily patient. He seemed to view women and wives as property, but he also selected women as spiritual and political leaders over the nation of Israel. He commanded Israel to vanquish the Canaanites, but also to care for the poor, the widows, the orphans and the foreigners. God in the Old Testament was complex. There was so much about God in the Old Testament that I didn't understand. I thought I could study the Old Testament for the rest of my life and never feel bored.

I chose the Old Testament.

A decade later I still can't imagine getting tired of studying the Old Testament. Nothing gives me more joy than teaching it. (Well, almost nothing.) I love the Old Testament, and in par-

ticular examining the God who is revealed there.

Over the years, though, I have noticed that atheists, agnostics and even Christians perceive the God of the Old Testament negatively. They read the same passages I have just mentioned and instead of seeing a complex portrayal of God that requires more study, they focus on the problematic aspects. As a result, they often ask about reconciling the harsh God of the Old Testament with the loving God of the New Testament. To them he seems angry, sexist and racist.

The God of the Old Testament has a bad reputation.

IS THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT REALLY ANGRY, SEXIST AND RACIST?

If you have spent time reading the Old Testament, you probably know what I'm talking about. While reading about the ark of the covenant's procession to Jerusalem, how many of us have wondered what Uzzah did that was so bad? Did God really have to instantly smite him for simply preventing the ark from tipping over (2 Sam 6:7)? Shouldn't Uzzah have been rewarded? Why was God so mad at him? Is the God of the Old Testament always angry?

After Lot has convinced the two angelic strangers not to spend the night in the Sodom town square, a violent mob surrounds his house (Gen 19:2-8). In an attempt to appease the crowd, Lot comes up with a brilliant idea: "Here, take my two virgin daughters instead." Isn't Lot supposed to be the only righteous guy in Sodom? How does his righteousness fit with his willingness to have his daughters raped?³ The text never condemns Lot for his brutal proposal, so it makes not only Lot but also his God seem misogynistic. Is the God of the Old Testament sexist?

As Israel was moving into the Promised Land, God com-

manded them to utterly wipe out the people of that land, the Canaanites (Josh 10:40). While the Canaanites were the bad guys (Deut 9:5), it still sounds like genocide. What kind of God would command such a slaughter? God seemed to value the Israelites more than the Canaanites. Is the God of the Old Testament racist?

Problematic texts such as these have contributed to a negative perception of God that is also found in popular culture.⁴

GOD THE COSMIC CAUSER OF CATASTROPHES

One of Gary Larson's most famous *The Far Side* cartoons depicts God sitting at his computer, which is displaying an image of an innocent-looking guy strolling along a sidewalk (with the standard Larsonian buckteeth).⁵ A huge piano hangs precariously, just inches over the guy's head, supported only by a few thin ropes. God watches with his hand hovering over the keyboard, his index finger about to strike the "SMITE" key.

Larson's portrayal of God is funny, but also tragic. Tragic because it strikes a little too close to home for readers of the Old Testament as we encounter texts that describe how God smites, strikes, slays and even slaughters.

We don't need to look far to find other examples of negative portrayals of God in popular culture. In *Bruce Almighty*, Bruce (Jim Carrey), in a fit of suicidal depression because he lost the anchor job to Evan Baxter (Steve Carell), screams to God, "Smite me, O mighty smiter!" Interestingly, the prophet Elijah made a similar request to God ("It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life"; 1 Kings 19:4).⁶ Apparently, both Bruce and Elijah seemed to think that smiting is part of God's job description. While we could argue that Bruce didn't really know God very well, we can't apply that logic to Elijah. After all, God liked him (Elijah, not Bruce) enough to swoop him up directly into heaven

(2 Kings 2:11). So, is smiting really part of God's nature?

In an episode from the first season of *The Simpsons*, Bart's Sunday school teacher concludes the lesson with "and that's why God causes train wrecks."⁷ While viewers aren't provided with the actual reasons, the teacher's perception of God as a cosmic causer of catastrophes seems to follow in the same vein as *The Far Side* and *Bruce Almighty*.

A "MEGALOMANIACAL, SADOMASOCHISTIC, CAPRICIOUSLY MALEVOLENT BULLY"?

While we might be tempted not to take these negative popular portrayals seriously because of their comical nature, it is difficult to brush aside quickly the view of atheist Richard Dawkins. In his bestselling book *The God Delusion*, he 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.⁸

While I don't agree with Dawkins's conclusions, his exaggerated tone does make for interesting reading, which explains its sales success. The fact that Dawkins's book has become an international bestseller indicates that he has touched a nerve.

The title of Christopher Hitchens's 2007 bestseller expresses a similar anti-God sentiment rather provocatively: *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.⁹ Perhaps no atheist writers since Bertrand Russell have made such a splash in popular culture as Dawkins and Hitchens. Larson, Bruce, *The Simpsons*, Dawkins and Hitchens all seem to view God negatively.

A negative perspective on God can even be found in the realm of insurance terminology. What is the legal term for disastrous events outside human control such as floods, earthquakes, tornadoes and hurricanes? “Acts of God.” While this terminology doesn’t necessarily preclude God doing good or kind acts, the lack of a negative qualifier (“*destructive acts of God*”) suggests that when God acts, he wreaks havoc.

I realize that *The Far Side* and *The Simpsons* do not always depict God as a cosmic smiter and that Morgan Freeman’s incarnation of God in the *Bruce/Evan Almighty* films is quite compelling.¹⁰ But these negative portrayals of God are not unusual within contemporary culture. And while some of the comic divine portrayals are not as negative, writers such as Dawkins and Hitchens approach the subject in a highly polemical manner. Their brutal critiques of God demand a response.

IMPEACHING GOD

On August 8, 1974, I was playing outside with my brothers and friends on a hot summer night when we were called inside to watch something historic on TV. We wondered what could possibly be more important than smashing home runs into our neighbors’ windows. (Someone clearly needed to sort out their priorities.) The parents informed us that the president was about to resign. We replied, “So what?” The voice of authority spoke: “*Come inside and watch TV!*” We watched as Richard Nixon told the nation that he would step down from the presidency. What was more shocking than the resignation itself, however, was the fact that the U.S. president was a criminal.

When the most powerful man in the world is not good, we ought to be concerned, but if the ruler of the cosmos is not good, that is even more deeply disturbing. We could say that Dawkins and Hitchens essentially “impeach” God by simply

choosing not to believe in him. They remove God from power and attempt to convince others that God is bad and that worship of God is a delusion. We need to examine carefully not only these accusations of Dawkins and others but also the biblical texts they use to argue their points.

It would be deeply troubling if the ruler of the cosmos were in fact angry, sexist and racist. It would be particularly disturbing for the many individuals who have been victims of violence, sexism or racism. While the God of the Old Testament does get angry, what characterizes him is love. While he may seem sexist, he is highly affirming of women. While he may seem racist, he is hospitable toward all people. And, as the rest of this book will show, the Bible supports these conclusions.

GOD WITH LONG, WAVY GRAY HAIR

What makes all these negative images of God particularly problematic for me is that they focus on my subject, the Old Testament. The God portrayed by Larson doesn't look like Jesus (no long, wavy brown hair), but rather resembles the Old Testament version (long, wavy *gray* hair). Jesus never smites anyone; in fact he seems to be averse to the whole smiting thing (Mt 5:39; Lk 22:49-51), but sometimes it seems that the Old Testament God can't keep his finger off the smite key (Ex 3:20; Num 25:17; Deut 7:2).¹¹ Jesus calms the storm (Mk 4:39), but the God of the Old Testament sends natural disasters (Ex 32:35; 2 Sam 24:15).¹²

Although Dawkins is repulsed by the Old Testament God, he likes Jesus: "Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the Old Testament."¹³ He even wrote an article titled "Atheists for Jesus."¹⁴ His attacks are clearly more focused on the God of Old Testament than the God of the New Testament. While I disagree with a lot of what Dawkins says, I will grant his point

that the portrayal of God in the Old Testament can be disturbing. Even more to the point, Dawkins's list of divine characteristics includes many of the negative perceptions of God that trouble readers of the Old Testament. In a 2009 *Atlantic* article adapted from his book *The Evolution of God*, Robert Wright makes a similar point as he contrasts the “belligerent” and “often harsh” God of the Old Testament with the more loving version of the New Testament: “Jesus came along and set a different tone.”¹⁵

There are numerous passages that people use to support their perspective that God is angry, sexist and racist. For those of us who read the Old Testament regularly, when we encounter these texts we are concerned, perplexed and, perhaps, tempted to ignore them. While I applaud Dawkins for bringing these problems into the open for discussion, I don't agree with his conclusions. He simply isn't reading his Bible well.

THE OLD TESTAMENT GOD VS. THE NEW TESTAMENT GOD

After recalling the question that began this chapter, a careful reader could say to me, “You are doing the same thing as Dawkins—not reading your Bible well.”

I confess that I am guilty.

A reading that sets up a contrast between a loving Old Testament God and a harsh New Testament God is a dramatic misreading of the Bible. However, a reading that does the opposite, contrasting the mean Old Testament God with the nice New Testament God, is also grossly inaccurate. But the initial question of this chapter and the following discussion were necessary to set up two general observations about biblical interpretation.

First, it is easy to misrepresent Scripture to make a point. We

don't need to read Dawkins or other atheists to encounter people distorting the Bible to make a point because, unfortunately, many preachers and teachers of Scripture are also guilty of this. One of the easiest ways to misrepresent Scripture is just to ignore problematic texts. Because Bible teachers so frequently avoid certain texts when writers like Dawkins discuss them, it can seem that atheists are reading the Bible more carefully than people who view it as the Word of God.

Within this book, I will emphasize positive aspects of God's character because the Old Testament repeatedly describes God in this manner. But if I am to be faithful to the whole Old Testament, I will also need to examine other texts, even ones that appear to undermine my arguments. Dawkins does not do this. He simply avoids texts that speak of God favorably. To avoid misrepresenting the Bible, we need to look at many texts, to study passages on both sides of an issue and to read texts within their context. This type of reading will involve work, but the result will be well worth the effort as our understanding of God is profoundly deepened.

My second observation about biblical interpretation is that it is tempting to over-represent the differences between the two testaments, to the point of perceiving two separate gods. When I speak about "the God of the Old Testament," it may seem that I am implying there is a dichotomy. I don't actually believe that the Old Testament God is different from the New Testament God, but I am aware that both in popular culture and within the church, a difference is perceived.

The dichotomized portrayal of a mean Old Testament God and a nice New Testament God has a long history. In early Christianity, Marcion (c. A.D. 80–160) taught that there were two distinct gods. The God of the Old Testament was a harsh god of law and justice, while the God of the New Testament was

a benevolent god of mercy and salvation. Marcion rejected the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, a conclusion that followed naturally from his view of the God it portrayed. We can see some of the attraction of Marcion's views (if we do not study the Old Testament), and Marcion's church became quite large in the second century.

Fortunately, for those of us who love the Old Testament, Marcion's views were deemed heretical by the church in the mid-second century. However, forms of the Marcionite heresy, with its anti-Old Testament perspective, still persist today, with the implication that many Christians do not read the Old Testament and appreciate what it has to offer. To overcome the legacy of Marcionism, we need to look more carefully at the Old Testament and read it alongside the New Testament, which is exactly what I hope to do in this book.

NAMES OF GOD: YAHWEH AND JESUS

To understand the nature of the God of both testaments, a good place to start is to look at divine names in the Bible.¹⁶ God is called many names and titles in the Old Testament. For something as simple as a name, the conversation quickly becomes complicated in the Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) with plural forms for a single God, pronominal suffixes and combination forms, but here I will be brief and only mention a few of the more significant names.¹⁷

The Bible first calls God simply "God," *elohim* (Gen 1:1). He is referred to by this name frequently throughout the Old Testament (approximately 2,600 times).¹⁸ God is also called either *adon* or *adonai*, "Lord" (Gen 15:2), over four hundred times in the Old Testament.

God's personal name, however, in the Old Testament is Yahweh (in Hebrew, יהוה). Traditionally, it has been spelled "Jeho-

vah” in English, but more recently it might be spelled without vowels as YHWH. In modern English Bibles, this name is typically translated as “the LORD.”¹⁹ While the Bible includes a variety of divine names, God is called Yahweh far more than any other name in Scripture, over 6,800 times. When he introduced himself to Moses, God basically said, “Please, call me Yahweh” (Ex 3:15).²⁰ It is significant that God tells his people to call him by a name (Yahweh) and not a title (the LORD). So, when speaking about the God of the Old Testament, I will refer to him by his name, Yahweh.

Jesus is referred to in many ways in the New Testament, including “Son of Man” (Mt 8:20), “Son of David” (Mt 1:1), “Immanuel” (Mt 1:23) and “Lord” (Mt 7:21). More than five hundred times in the New Testament, Jesus is called “Christ,” but his personal name, lest we forget, is simply “Jesus,” and he was called this far more than either “Lord” or “Christ,” almost a thousand times (958). So, when speaking about the God of the New Testament, I will use the name Jesus.

Just to be clear about theology, I believe not only that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one, but also that Jesus and Yahweh are essentially one, but here it will be convenient to speak of God in the Old Testament as Yahweh and God in the New Testament as Jesus. I would hope this practice is not controversial, since I am simply following the conventions for divine names established in the two testaments. While the New Testament often refers to “God” generally and to the specific members of the divine Trinity (the Father, the Son, the Spirit), the divine name used most often in the New Testament is “Jesus,” and this provides a good parallel to the Old Testament’s usage of Yahweh.

Because I teach graduate students, many of whom are older than I am, I ask them to call me Dave. I am surprised how many

of them persist in referring to me by titles (professor, doctor, doc, sir). I realize that students often use titles as a sign of respect, and non-Western traditions place a much higher value on that than mine does, but it is difficult not to feel that the practice of referring to me with a title keeps students at a distance. When a student who had called me Dr. Lamb finally calls me Dave, the relationship has shifted toward friendship.

I certainly think that it is appropriate in many settings to call God “God,” “the Lord” or “Christ,” but I am surprised at how infrequently Christians use “Yahweh” or even “Jesus,” the two names the Bible uses most often for God. When we don’t use personal names for God, an aspect of the relationship is lost.²¹ The biblical pattern of referring to God primarily as Yahweh in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament tells us that God wants to be on a first-name basis with his people. This model of intimacy in relationship between God and his people characterizes both testaments.

JESUS LOVED THE OLD TESTAMENT

People who overdichotomize the two testaments seem to forget one important fact: the Bible of Jesus was the Old Testament. His value for the Old Testament can be seen in how frequently he referred to it. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus quoted Deuteronomy three times in the wilderness to Satan (Lk 4:4, 8, 12; Deut 6:13, 16; 8:3), and he quoted the Psalms as his final words on the cross (Mt 27:46; Ps 22:1). Throughout his entire ministry Jesus constantly mentioned the Old Testament law, the Prophets and the Psalms (for example, Lk 7:27; 10:26; 18:31; 19:46; 20:17; 22:37; 24:44). Jesus loved the Old Testament.

What is particularly relevant for this discussion, however, is that Jesus used the Old Testament to describe God. His description of God as a vineyard owner (Mt 21:33) came straight

out of Isaiah 5:1-2. When Jesus told a scribe that the Lord our God is one (Mk 12:29), he quoted Deuteronomy 6:4. When the high priest asked him if he is the Christ, Jesus first stated, “I am,” an allusion to God’s Old Testament name, Yahweh (Ex 3:14), and then he combined two Old Testament texts into a prophecy that they will see him as the Son of Man seated at God’s right hand (Ps 110:1), coming in the clouds of heaven (Dan 7:13). Jesus frequently used Old Testament images to describe both himself and God as a bridegroom (Is 62:5; Mk 2:19), as a shepherd (Ezek 34; Jn 10:11) and as a king (Ps 47; Mt 18:23). Jesus not only knew the Old Testament, he also identified completely with its God.

Jesus also understood that the main thing that God expects of humans is love. To support the idea that God is primarily concerned about love, where did Jesus go? The Old Testament. In his response to a question about which command was the greatest, Jesus mentioned two from the Old Testament (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18); the first one tells us to love God completely and the second tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mk 12:30-31).²² While Christians unfortunately have a tendency to focus on other issues, Jesus knew that Yahweh is a God of love.

HOW DO NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF YAHWEH AFFECT READERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?

It is easy to forget that the God of both testaments is primarily concerned about love, and negative images of Yahweh can contribute to this memory loss. Negative perceptions of God, stemming from erroneous interpretations of the Old Testament, not only affect non-Christians who refuse to believe in him because of their misperceptions, they also affect Christians, in both obvious and subtle ways. So let’s look at a few of the spiritual problems that emerge from distorted perceptions of Yahweh.

Our image of God will directly affect how we either pursue or avoid God. If we believe that the God of the Old Testament is really harsh, unfair and cruel, we won't want anything to do with him. Who would want to have a close relationship with a divine version of Adolf Hitler? Dawkins and Hitchens not only want to avoid God, but also have become "evangelists" spreading the good news that theism is delusional.

Interestingly, the people in the Old Testament who knew God best desperately desired to be with him: Enoch and Noah (Gen 5:24; 6:9), Abraham and Jacob (Gen 18:1-5; 32:26), Moses and Joshua (Ex 33:11, 15-16), Deborah and Hannah (Judg 4:4; 5:1-31; 1 Sam 1:10-12; 2:1-10), David and Solomon (1 Sam 13:14; 1 Kings 8:23-61), Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 19:10; 2 Kings 6:16-20). These individuals must have understood something about God that we don't. It is my hope that, as we examine both their God and their lives, we will become more like them and our desire to draw near to God will increase.

A negative perception about God could also affect a person's passion for reading Scripture. Many Christians feel guilty for not reading their Bibles, so it doesn't help that when they finally get around to doing it, they encounter a command not to wear wool and linen together followed by a command to wear tassels on the corners of their clothes (Deut 22:11-12). Hmm. Why does God care about our attire, particularly something as mundane as interwoven garments? (Especially when we know that the devil wears Prada.) Even a pious believer might decide no longer to bother to read the Old Testament after discovering commands like these. (We'll discuss this command about clothes in chapter six.)

Interestingly, the author of Psalm 119 does not view God's commands as obscure, bizarre or irrelevant. In fact, the psalmist uses language that is almost embarrassingly effusive toward

the law: “My soul is consumed with longing for your ordinances at all times” (Ps 119:20). This psalm sounds more like romantic poetry than a worship hymnal. And there’s a lot more where that came from: “Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long” (Ps 119:97). It is fascinating that the longest chapter in the entire Bible is devoted to singing the praises of God’s law. The psalmist was obsessed with Scripture. The psalmist knew God and God’s Word well, and that fueled a passion for reading it. Greater familiarity with Yahweh and the Old Testament should not discourage us from reading the Bible, but increase our love for it.

Our image of God will also affect what we think God’s followers should be like. If God really were angry, sexist and racist, it would follow that Christians would be as well. The issues of violence, race and gender are some of the most pressing and controversial ones facing the world today. A lot has been written about how popular perceptions of Christians and the church affect popular perceptions of God. Unfortunately, the church is generally perceived in popular culture as contributing to the problem and not as part of the solution.

Compared to other ancient Near Eastern literature, the Old Testament is shockingly progressive in its portrayals of divine love, acceptance of foreigners and affirmation of women. The Old Testament was not only divinely inspired, it was also culturally engaged. As we become aware of the context of the Old Testament, the problematic portrayals of Yahweh don’t magically disappear, but they do become more understandable. And as we study the cultural contexts alongside the numerous passages that portray Yahweh more favorably, not only does a highly attractive God emerge, but God’s followers also appear as people we would want to emulate, not as hotheads, chauvinists and bigots.

GOD BEHAVING BADLY?

The rest of this book will discuss many problematic passages in the Old Testament in which God appears to behave badly. It will examine negative perceptions of the God of the Old Testament, with each chapter focusing on a different issue. I realize that some divine perceptions are more controversial (angry, sexist, racist and violent) than others (legalistic, rigid and distant), but all find some basis in the Old Testament and most appear in some form in Dawkins's quote.

Since we can find a verse to say almost anything, I will look at many biblical texts across the diverse genres of Old Testament literature in an attempt to find patterns of descriptions of divine behavior and to characterize the God of the Old Testament as generally as possible. I will not only discuss how pervasive these perceptions are in popular culture, but also interact with relevant ancient Near Eastern texts to understand the issue within its own historical context. I will end each chapter looking at a relevant incident from the Gospels, showing how the particular characteristic of Yahweh is also manifested in the behavior of Jesus. It is my hope that your love not only for the Old Testament but also for the God of both testaments will deepen as you read these chapters.

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