

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

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Why did God smite Uzzah?

The ark of the covenant had fallen into the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam 4–5), and David was finally bringing back the lost ark to Jerusalem. . . . The festivities basically included a big parade with dancing, celebrating and a marching band. Suddenly, the cart carrying the ark shook as the oxen that were pulling it stumbled. Uzzah, one of the men walking alongside it, reached out to stabilize the ark, but Yahweh got angry at Uzzah and instantly killed him.

What prompted this divine display of rage? Wasn't Uzzah doing a good thing by protecting the ark from tipping over? Surely whatever he was doing didn't deserve a death sentence. Why did God have to kill him? Even David, a man after God's own heart, got mad at Yahweh for the outburst. Stories like this give the God of the Old Testament a bad reputation.

While the story of Uzzah and the ark is deeply troubling, as we begin to examine the causes of God's anger it becomes more understandable. Yahweh was angry here for three main reasons.

Carrying the ark. First, Yahweh told the Israelites how to carry the ark, and they weren't obeying. Yahweh told them that they were not to transport the ark on a cart, but it was to be carried by the priests on poles through rings on the side of the ark (Ex 25:10-15; Num 4:15; 7:7-9; Deut 10:8). Yahweh's directions were not found just in one obscure text, but he made it very clear throughout the law how the ark was to be transported. Previously in the narrative, the ark had always been carried the right way by Israel (Deut 31:9, 25; Josh 3:3, 15, 17; 4:9, 10, 18; 6:6; 8:33; 1 Sam 4:4).

Yahweh's concern with proper protocols for ark transportation may seem a bit OCD (like symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder) to our postmodern, highly casual sensibilities, but an analogy might help us understand the need for precaution. Handling the ark was inherently dangerous, like handling radioactive materials. If people do not use proper precaution when transporting plutonium, people die. The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) gives even more-detailed guidelines about transporting radioactive materials than the Pentateuch does about transporting the ark. . . . Personally, I'm glad the NRC is a bit OCD when it



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comes to moving nuclear waste through my neighborhood. . . . God gave the Israelites guidelines to protect them from being reckless with the ark, because God is more powerful than plutonium.

While God had told them in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, maybe they forgot, or perhaps they hadn't been meditating on these books recently, so they didn't know how Yahweh wanted the ark transported. Well, actually it would have been difficult to forget how the ark was meant to be carried, because it had two rings on each side for the poles, so that every time they looked at it they would be reminded that Yahweh wanted it to be borne on the shoulders of the priests. We know that they knew the correct way to carry it, because three months after the tragedy with Uzzah, they carried the ark all the way to Jerusalem just as God had told them to transport it (2 Sam 6:13). The Chronicles version of the incident makes it clear that Yahweh was angry because they weren't carrying it properly (1 Chron 15:11-13).

The timing of Yahweh's anger is also significant here. The text repeatedly informs us that "all" Israel was present (2 Sam 6:1, 2, 5); a crowd of 30,000 people was watching this parade. With an audience of the entire nation, Yahweh did not want to send the message that obedience was optional, since it was disobedience that led to the loss of the ark earlier and the slaughter by Philistines of 30,000 Israelites (1 Sam 4:10). Anger displayed in situations of disobedience gets people's attention. Yahweh's extreme display of anger certainly got the attention of David and the rest of the nation. After the incident with Uzzah, the ark was always carried the right way (2 Sam 6:13; 15:29; 1 Kings 2:26; 8:3).

So it makes sense that Yahweh was mad because the Israelites should have known better. While Uzzah's death seems harsh, Yahweh had warned them. He told them if anyone touched the ark, he or she would die (Num 4:15). Uzzah should not have touched it. . . .

Riding in the trunk. The second reason Yahweh became mad is that their decision to transport the ark on a cart was not only disobedient, it was also insulting. To understand how a method of transportation could be insulting, we need to recall what the ark represented: the presence of God (Ex 25:22; Lev 16:2; 1 Sam 4:4). Therefore, it warranted extraordinary care. What the law prescribed for the conveyance of the ark was basically a litter

(a chair or throne for a distinguished person supported by people carrying poles on each side). Royalty was frequently honored by this method of transport, going back to ancient China and Egypt. King Solomon was carried around on a litter (Song 3:7) as was the Syrian ruler Antiochus V (2 Macc 9:8). It was important for Yahweh's symbolic presence to be treated in a royal fashion because he was their God and King. David needed not to forget that even though he was king over Israel, Yahweh was sovereign over him and the nation.

Litters were for rulers, but carts or wagons were for things (offerings: Num 7:3; tabernacle equipment: Num 7:7-8; grain: Amos 2:13). *Never* for royalty. Placing the ark on a cart was an insult. They were celebrating its return, but by putting the ark on a cart, they were in essence saying the ark was cargo. Also, it was the Philistines who came up with the idea of the ark-cart (1 Sam 6:8-11), so instead of following God's law, they were following the example of their enemies. It shouldn't surprise us that God was mad. . . .

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What would it be like if the U.S. president were to come to a town for a parade and the city council asked him to ride in the trunk of a car? He or she would be offended and almost certainly angry. That's basically what Israel was doing with the ark. They should have known better. It was an insult to Yahweh, so he became mad. They needed to treat the ark not simply as a box, because it had a profound symbolic meaning as the presence of God in their midst. It deserved respect. But the ark represented even more than that.

Losing the ark. Third, Israel's lack of respect toward the ark was symptomatic of a lack of concern for their relationship with God, and that made him mad too. The ark symbolized not only the presence of Yahweh, but also the covenantal relationship between God and his people. The text frequently calls it the Ark of the Covenant of Yahweh (Num 10:33; 14:44; Deut 10:8; 31:9; Josh 3:3, 11; 1 Sam 4:3, 4, 5; 1 Kings 3:15; 6:19; Jer 3:16). The ark contained a copy of the Ten Commandments (Deut 10:1-5), which told Israel what their covenant with Yahweh involved: to love God and to love their neighbor.

In general, the Old Testament tells the story of a one-sided relationship, in which one partner (Yahweh) is more committed than the other (Israel) to

*Would you want
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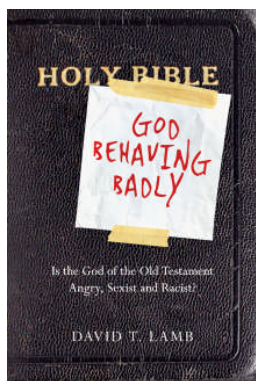
the covenant. Often God is patient and doesn't punish instantly, but eventually he may need to take drastic measures to get their attention. Because of their perpetual disrespect for the ark of Yahweh and the public nature of this transportation ceremony, it was now a critical time and it warranted sudden punishment. Yahweh valued the covenant with his people so highly that he wanted to communicate the message that he would not tolerate disrespect for the object that symbolized that relationship.

Those of us who are married have a similar covenantal symbolic object: a wedding ring. I once lost mine for almost two months. I hated being without it because its absence suggested not only that I was irresponsible, but also that I didn't value my relationship with Shannon. Eventually, our dog, Tiglath (named after the Assyrian ruler, 2 Kings 15:29), lost his tennis ball underneath the washbasin in our laundry room. He was too scared of the washbasin to go retrieve it (he's only part retriever), so Shannon got down on the floor, fought past the sea of endless tennis shoes, reached through the concoction of soccer mud, grass clippings, canine fur and laundry lint, stretched out for the ball and found what? My missing ring. It had slipped off my finger while I was giving Tig a bath. Later that day, we had a Dave's-ring-is-back celebration, although ours wasn't as elaborate as King David's the-ark-is-back celebration (and I kept my clothes on; see 2 Sam 6:14, 20).

For a long time after finding the ring, I was extra careful with it because I didn't want to lose it again. Although Yahweh wasn't the one who had just lost the ark, apparently he felt similarly about it. Yahweh's people had just lost their "ring" (the ark) to the Philistines because of their evil deeds and their careless attitude toward the ark. Yahweh didn't want them to lose it again and, like my concern for my ring, he wanted them to be more careful with it. His display of anger toward Uzzah was effective. For the remainder of the monarchy, they not only carried the ark the right way, but there was never a "sequel" of the incident of the lost ark.

From the Uzzah incident, we learn that Yahweh gets mad to protect his law, his honor and his relationship with his people. Would you want to follow a God that wasn't passionate about his relationship with you?

—Adapted from chapter two, "Angry or Loving?"



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God Is ~~Not~~ Great

In recent years, the New Atheists have publicly maligned God with scathing critiques and cast serious doubt on God's goodness and trustworthiness.

In *God Behaving Badly*, Old Testament scholar David Lamb sets out to fix God's bad reputation. Bringing his extensive study of the Old Testament to the task, Lamb engages with Scripture and history to provide reassuring answers to nagging questions and concerns about God's behavior in the Old Testament. While not minimizing the complexity of the biblical record, Lamb shows that when assessed in proper context, God is certainly not the devil he has been made out to be.

- Why does our understanding of God matter?
- Is the God of the Old Testament angry, sexist and racist?
- Is the God of the Old Testament violent, legalistic and rigid?
- How do you contend with the idea that the God of the Old Testament is harsh while the God of the New Testament is loving?
- How might we read Scripture to ensure that we have the correct image of God?