

Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God | Paul Copan

Reviewed by Rev. Warren Coe in the November 2012 Philogian
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A Spiritual Struggle

In 1971 I came to Christ. A year later I faced a spiritual crisis; how do I reconcile the God of grace in the New Testament with the God of the Old Testament? To make matters worse, a fellow student in Near East History colloquy at San Jose State University declared that the God of the Old Testament is full of wrath and hatred, but the God of the New Testament is loving and merciful. In other words there are two different Gods in the Bible.

A Shared Theological Difficulty

I speak for many earnest Christians who share this same theological difficulty. God tells the Israelites to conquer Canaan and kill men, women and children. To Abraham, the Lord commands him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. We also find "Bride-Price," Polygamy and concubinage tolerated in the Old Testament. What gives? How do we reconcile the actions of God in the Old Testament with the actions of God in the New Testament?

"Is God a Moral Monster?"

Paul Copan has written a good book that "Presents helpful resolutions and responses to perplexing Old Testament ethics questions." (pg11). "Dr. Copan (PhD, Marquette University) is the Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University in Florida. He is the author or editor of many books, including *When God Goes to Starbucks*."

Dr. Copan takes on the "Neo-Atheism" that attacks the brutality of God in the Old Testament and His inconsistent or capricious behavior in the Bible. People like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens are in his view. Since September 11, 2001, "The New Atheists have capitalized on evil done 'in the name of religion' to tar all things religious with the same brush." (pg16)

How Do we Understand God's Moral Decisions in the Old Testament?

Is God a jealous God? Yes. "The reason why God is jealous is because he binds himself to his people in a kind of spousal intimacy. So worshiping idols and other gods is a rejection of who he is, just as adultery is a rejection of one's spouse in marriage." (pg36) This explains why God sent pestilence and foreign armies against Israel—not divine wrath but loving discipline.

Does God promote "Child Abuse and Bullying? (pg42). Kierkegaard concludes that God sets aside His moral code which makes him a relativist, when he commands Abraham to sacrifice his only begotten son. But Copan points out that (1) God was testing Abraham, (2) God's strong command is tender; "please take your son." (3) God is faithful having given Abraham his son and (4) God is the God of provision—Moriah means "provide." Copan writes, "In all of these ways, we see God's faithful tenderness cushioning the startling harshness of God's command. It's as though God is saying to Abraham, 'I'm testing your obedience and allegiance. You don't understand, but in light of all I've done and said to you, trust me. Not even death can nullify the promise I've made.'" (pg48).

What about wiping out all the Canaanites? Chapter 15 of Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster* takes up this problem. He titles it "Indiscriminate Massacre and Ethnic Cleansing." I found this chapter helpful. He gives historic consideration to the depravity of

the Canaanites. He shows their bloody and sex-saturated idolatry; it's wholesale devaluation of human life. Copan writes, "Sometimes God simply gives up on nations, cities, or individuals when they've gone past a point of no return. Judgment—whether directly or indirectly—is the last resort. (pg159)

Summary Thoughts

I'm not sure if Dr. Copan's interaction with the neo-atheists was particularly helpful other than the fact they are currently raising questions about God's moral behavior in the Bible. However, Copan's analysis and explanation of God's actions is stellar. I wish this book was written in 1972. Dr. Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster* provides cogent answers to prickly and somewhat embarrassing questions about the God of our Bible.

I highly recommend this book for individual and group studies.