

is God just?

Marolin Watson considers our view of God





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If you've never read the Old Testament from beginning to end, you won't understand why scientists like Richard Dawkins, intellectuals like Christopher Hitchens, philosophers like Daniel Dennett and even thoughtful actor Stephen Fry would answer this question with a resounding 'NO'. The problem with all these thinkers is that they are reading the Bible through the lens of 21st-century morality. And so, Richard Dawkins pronounces, in *The God Delusion*, that God 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

So, let's look at each of these claims in turn and see if there is any basis for them.

Is God 'jealous and proud of it'? To be sure, God many times describes himself as a jealous God, most famously in the first commandment as found in Exodus 20:5: '*You shall not bow down to them [idols] or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me...*' And here we see one of the reasons why God is considered by Dawkins to be 'unjust' as well as jealous. Is it fair to punish children for the sins of their parents?

But moving on – is God petty? When you read through the minutiae of the ceremonial and social laws described in Leviticus, you might be tempted to agree. Why should it matter whether you plant two kinds of crop in a field, or wear clothing woven from two kinds of material² – both common practices today? Why should men not cut the hair at the sides of their heads or clip off the edges of their beards?³

Is God unjust? As you read through the Old Testament you will find instances where, to our eyes, God is not acting justly or consistently.

Why are Saul (and his descendants) removed from kingship for offering unauthorised but understandable sacrifices to God before a major battle,⁴ when David's kingdom endures despite his adultery and the murder by proxy of the wronged husband when he is unable to trick him into believing the resulting baby is his?⁵ Solomon, the product of that adulterous relationship, ends his life in disgrace, joining his many foreign wives in worshipping false gods.⁶ Yet the promise of an enduring kingship for the family line is not removed from him either, albeit over a much-reduced kingdom in the short-term.⁷

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What about the story of the 'man of God' found in 1 Kings 13? Having taken his life in his hands to deliver a prophetic message to the wicked king Jeroboam, and been the conduit of two notable miracles in the process, he refuses the offer of food at the king's table. God has instructed him 'not to eat bread or drink water here'. But when an elderly prophet intercepts him and says that God has instructed him to offer hospitality to the man of God (he is lying for a reason not explained), the man of God takes him at his word and eats and drinks with him. For this act of 'disobedience', he is killed by a lion on the road. The punishment seems disproportionate to the act.

We consider slavery to be unjust and yet nowhere in the Bible is the practice condemned. On the contrary, laws for the treatment of slaves are embedded in the code,⁸ and Paul urges slaves to be obedient to their masters, although he also requires masters who are believers to treat their slaves well.⁹

controlling?

'Unforgiving control freak'? There is no question that God demands total obedience – and disobedience is sometimes dealt with in ways that seem harsh to us, involving not just the guilty party, but also their families (for example, the case of Korah, Dathan and Abiram;¹⁰ and Achan¹¹).

'Vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser' and 'genocidal'? Much has been written by believers to justify the mass slaughter of the former inhabitants of the promised land, often including women, children and livestock, by Joshua and his army. Most of us would not subscribe to the view of Alister McGrath in his book *The Dawkins Delusion* that the Jews 'were making sense of their human situation in relation to a God about whose nature their thinking became more and more developed in the millennium over which the material that makes up these Scriptures was being produced...'¹² This seems to imply that they may have been mistaken about God's instructions to wipe out the inhabitants of the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. For those with a high view of biblical inspiration, this is not an option.

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discriminatory?

Is God 'misogynistic, homophobic and racist'? Consistent with the culture of the time, women (and girls) are, at best, bit players in the biblical drama and sometimes regarded as male possessions, along with livestock.¹³ Menstruation makes a woman and anything she sits or lies on ceremonially 'unclean' for seven days. Anyone who touches her or anything she sits or lies on during this time must wash themselves and their clothing and be unclean until the evening.¹⁴

Homosexual practice is unequivocally condemned, both in the Old and New Testaments,¹⁵ but does that make God homophobic? Atheists

think so because to them it seems an arbitrary prohibition.

racist?

Is God racist? You could read 'racism' into his choosing the Jewish nation above all others, but there are laws that require foreigners living amongst them to be treated fairly¹⁶ provided, of course, that they are not so numerous as to subvert the worship of the true God, as often happened.

And what about 'infanticidal' and 'filicidal'? Apart from the slaughter of children that took place during the invasion of the promised land, there is, in contrast to many other nations at the time, only one occasion when God asks someone to sacrifice a child – the well-known case of Abraham and his son Isaac.¹⁷ God did not follow through on this, providing an alternative at the last moment, and Christians recognise that Abraham was being tested as the forebear of the one who would later be sacrificed to redeem us all. But even that is a cause of offence – God himself is seen as filicidal.

killer?

We will ignore the last few adjectives that Dawkins uses to describe God, as enough has been said to show that atheists may have some justification for their low view of God.

If you have ever read the Old Testament from beginning to end, you may have struggled yourself with some of these issues – I know I did. But I also prayed – and below are some of the insights that came to me.

insights

Some of the laws and much of what happens in the Old Testament are hard for us to understand because we view them through the lens of our own culture which has been heavily influenced by Christianity, even if it is progressively departing from these roots and has plenty of failures of its own. Culture is a relative thing, constantly changing and exerting a deep and largely unconscious effect

on the people living within it. God is not so much concerned with taking men out of the context of their cultural background as he is that they should live by his principles within it.

Many Old Testament laws are ahead of their time in instituting fairness and justice within what is essentially iron age culture. In amongst the laws we find difficult, are others we can wholeheartedly approve. For example: 'Do not steal', 'Do not lie', 'Do not deceive one another'; 'Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life'.¹⁸ God's concern for the poor, the orphan and the widow is well known and we see it throughout the Old Testament.

How we regard issues like slavery in the Bible will depend very much on where we find our absolutes, whether with God, or in the humanistic values of 21st century culture. It is very clear that our ideas about man's dignity, freedom and justice are quite different from God's. We go wrong when we have such a high view of man that we are left with a low view of God.

The relatively low status of women in the Old Testament and even, to some extent, in the New, is equally troubling to modern minds, though change has been slow to come even in our day. But surely a part of submission to God also involves accepting his judgment of things. It is human pride that seeks to make men and women 'equal' (in the sense that we currently understand it). Life has value not because of where we stand in relation to other men, but because of where we stand with God. If I were a slave, and a female at that, but lived a life of humble submission and obedience to God and his will, then in heaven I will not be less than any king. We forget that this life is the mere blink of an eye when compared with eternity, and it causes us to over-value what happens to us here.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Two previous *Nucleus* articles consider the detail of God's treatment of the Canaanites:

■ Is God a Genocidal Monster?

Part one: cmf.li/2Sd4LvT

Part two: cmf.li/3w5SnMe

Paul Copan's book '*Is God a moral monster? Making sense of the Old Testament God*' is helpful reading for those wanting to look more deeply into this subject.

Romans 9 is a hard pill for many Christians to swallow. Read verses 7-24 and see how high a view God has of man's freedom. In response to the question – 'Is God unjust?' that arises in all of our minds when we read this passage, Paul has only this to say: '*But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?"*'¹⁹

undeserving

The greatest 'injustice' that God has committed, for which we thank him daily, is to offer up the one man who never sinned and was thus undeserving of death, the one man God loved above all others, as the sacrificial lamb that takes away your sin and my sin.

The bottom line is that God is God and we are but dust.²⁰ If we have 'tasted and seen that the Lord is good',²¹ then we can wrestle with the difficulties, but we are also able to bow before the sovereign Lord of the universe in humble but joyful submission.

For now we see only through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known
(1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV). ■

REFERENCES

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3. Leviticus 19:27
4. 1 Samuel 13:1-15
5. 2 Samuel 11
6. 1 Kings 11
7. 1 Kings 12:1-24
8. Exodus 21:2-6, 7-8, 20-21, 32; Leviticus 19:20
9. Ephesians 6:5-9
10. Exodus 16
11. Joshua 7
12. McGrath, AE, McGrath JC. *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2007:90
13. Exodus 20:17
14. Leviticus 15:19-30
15. Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26-28
16. Leviticus 19:33-34
17. Genesis 22:1-18
18. Leviticus 19:11, 19:16
19. Romans 9:20
20. Genesis 3:19; Isaiah 40:15
21. Psalm 34:8