

The New-Atheist Obsession with the ‘God of the Old Testament’

Introduction

In recent years, the well-known cabal of ‘new atheist’ polemicists, have made much of the alleged barbarity and moral inferiority of the God presented in the pages of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. For the purpose of setting the scene for our response, I include the following two extracts as typical of the genre:

What moral instruction do we get from the God of Abraham on this subject (slavery)? Consult the Bible, and you will discover that the creator of the universe clearly expects us to keep slaves... The Bible also makes it clear that every man is free to sell his daughter into sexual slavery...¹

And...

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...²

Most people familiar with these writings will be more aware of the latter quotation, but you may be assured that remarkably similar sentiments abound in the writings of Christopher Hitchens, Dan Barker and on the many atheist websites which now feed the demand for simple answers to complex questions.

Defining the Problem

I suspect that many Christians would respond with some disbelief to these kinds of statement. It is worth asking where the new atheists are deriving their criticisms, and it would seem to originate from OT passages which narrate such topics as; (a) Mosaic regulations on slavery, (b) the Canaanite Wars, (c) Levitical ‘health and safety’ regulations, (d) Noah’s Flood, (e) any passage which presents God as judging sin.

Of course there are other examples, some more significant and others less so. When one attempts to debate the subject, suddenly the points of attack multiply relentlessly.

Some Initial Thoughts

If Christian believers find that they do not find a ‘problem’ with these passages, the New Atheists have their answer all ready, packaged and ready to go: it is because ‘faith-heads’ just believe stuff without thinking very deeply about it. To the atheist, this is evidence of the underlying problem: religion brainwashes people into believing things which are immediately questionable, should we choose to exercise our rationality. A superficially appealing piece of rhetoric this, which has the benefit of allowing the skeptic to entertain notions of superiority, and thereby talk down to those who cling on to outmoded ways of thinking. Before we begin to consider the detail, it is perhaps worth reflecting on this implied claim.

Clearly, there will be Christians who have a simple, trusting faith. They have never felt the need to go into every last detail of what they believe, and, having come to a knowledge of the core truths of the Christian faith, and trusted in Christ, they do not feel compelled to investigate the OT slavery

¹ Harris, S. *Letter to a Christian Nation*. London, Transworld Publishers. 2007, p14-15

² Dawkins, R. *The God Delusion*. London, Transworld Publishers. 2006, p31

regulations or other points of abstract detail. There is a point in everyone's life where we place our confidence in those things that we *do* know, and stop obsessing about those things that we do *not* know - and that's a principle for our mental health which I suspect is as important to atheist as it is to believer. For those people who are merely 'religious', in the same way that many commuters use public transport, then Dawkinsian cavils about the OT are likely to be of little import.

However, the Mindless Believer may be a fond caricature of the New Atheists, but actually many Christians *do* know their Bibles, and have a reasonably clear picture of why they believe what they believe. Whilst it is possible that a great deal of the secularist bluster about the OT may have led to a kind of retrenchment in confidence, in my experience most Christians who actually read their Bibles probably already have quite adequate answers in place to answer the claims of these polemicists.

This leads us to what I think is a fairly inescapable conclusion: the pronouncements of the New Atheists in relation to these 'questionable' OT passages, are rarely based upon as much information or insight as is (or should be) possessed by normal Christians. It is worth going through the writings of individuals such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens with a highlighter in hand, to identify the arguments they attempt to construct, based upon the wrenching of biblical texts out of context. You will find it occurs in a majority of cases - in many instances, the very next sentence in the relevant passage is sufficient to disprove the contention being advanced by the skeptic. It is a practice that is particularly galling in someone such as Christopher Hitchens, as he is such a good writer, with such a high regard for the English language - it is difficult to imagine him treating any other literary work in such a cavalier way.

These writers advance their arguments against the God of the Bible in a triumphalist way, almost as if they think they are the first to have spotted the issue in question: the reality is that in all except a minority of instances, centuries of biblical scholarship has usually resolved the main challenges presented.

Some Specifics

I do want to comment on the artificiality of the argument advanced by the New Atheists in respect of the 'God of the Old Testament'. They labour hard to show Him as a barbarous, vengeful, hateful deity, who is unworthy of our respect - and usually, in so doing, quite deliberately ignore the vast body of material which demonstrates that He is loving, gracious, caring and infinitely dependable. But the very construction of their argument tends to be, in practice, a smokescreen - they have not chosen to disbelieve in God because of those passages in the OT: they wouldn't believe in Him *anyway*. The OT could present God in a kind of one-dimensional, saccharin and entirely inoffensive manner, and it would not ameliorate the degree of skepticism one whit. For that reason, as one encounters this carping against the character of God, regurgitated ad nauseam in the writings of the New Atheists, and via their online acolytes, the strongest impression is created that this is mostly hubris.

Secondly, when we encounter these kinds of arguments emanating from friends or colleagues who self-identify as atheists, I think it reasonable to see this as a byproduct of the kind of polemic generated by those authors listed earlier. It rarely arises from an independent, thoughtful searching of the Scriptures, in order to discover what they are about - that approach tends to produce a quite different set of conclusions. The 'God of the Old Testament' diatribe tends, in practice, to self-diagnose a variant of skepticism which is simply looking for a convenient prop to rest unbelief upon. In that respect, I find that, with relatively few exceptions, the New Atheists rarely tend to fulfil the expectations implicit in their smug sense of superiority. It would clearly be quite unfair (and wrong) to tar all individuals with the same brush, but after some four years or so of debating these issues online with atheists, I have concluded that it is in fact *extremely rare* for such individuals to engage with any seriousness with the source materials (ie. the biblical text and ancient commentators). They tend to be heavily reliant upon whatever convenient gloss they have encountered within their favourite polemic, or on an online library of pat arguments. When one

tries to upgrade the discussion to a more focused study of the text, they become impatient, keen to move on to their next killer argument - or they will simply resolve the issue by an appeal to authority. It is remarkable just how much authority Richard Dawkins seems to have in matters theological and philosophical, areas where he has no training, and no apparent expertise.

Thirdly, I want to highlight the danger of retrospectively reading contemporary ideas or values back into ancient texts. Christians can actually fall into this trap, so perhaps it is not so surprising that the New Atheists depend heavily upon the practice. For instance, what is described in Leviticus as 'slavery' is actually a form of indentured service, and bears little or no resemblance to what we understand as 'slavery', which was abolished in the UK due to Wilberforce's reforms. The New Atheists tend to brandish the word, like a club, in the hope that people won't look too closely at what it means in practice. Another example is the imposition of the word 'genocide' (coined by Raphael Lemkin, in 1944) onto the subject of the Canaanite wars in Deuteronomy. If the reader takes the time to actually work through the historical narrative, he or she will swiftly become aware that this very limited context for warfare doesn't actually resemble the terms beloved of atheists (they misuse the phrase 'ethnic cleansing' as well). Take a little time to actually engage with the text, and you'll discover that you have to do real damage to the narrative to shoe-horn it into the filing system employed by the New Atheists.

My Cop-Out

I have kept my response to the atheists' criticism of God's character in the Old Testament fairly general - the above paragraph is about as specific as I wish to get in this context. This is for the following reasons:

1. my suspicion is that, for *most* modern skeptics, the detail is, for them, irrelevant - and therefore, it is rather futile to present a more detailed analysis of the biblical data, if they are simply not prepared to engage with it;
2. I think the broad principles outlined above do, actually, take us quite some way in engaging with the polemic;
3. for the thinking person, there are actually good resources to help in this area. There seems little point in reinventing the wheel then, if you are *really*, genuinely exercised about the matter, when the following books are readily available:
 - 'God Behaving Badly' - by David T. Lamb (IVP)
 - 'Is God a Moral Monster?' - by Paul Copan (Baker Books)
 - 'Old Testament Ethics for the People of God' - by Chris Wright (IVP)

Of these three, the first is the shortest, and lightest introduction to the subject.

Finally

The God presented in the Old Testament stands apart from the tribal deities of the Ugaritic and Canaanitish cultures. He is infinitely more complex and nuanced - he certainly acts in ways which are ethically distinct from the horrific Canaanite deities of Astarte, Dagon, Molech and Ba'al - many of whose religious practices have become part-imported into our increasingly pagan culture, and about which the New Atheists are strangely silent.

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