

YOUR GOD IS A BULLY

Responding to Difficulties in the Old Testament

Brett Bruster

COMMON MISPERCEPTION

“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.”

– Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

A DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDING

“The curious thing about this reading of God in the Old Testament is that it *does* claim to be a reading of the Old Testament. Yet it is perfectly clear that the authors who passed on to us these texts did not themselves believe what Dawkins and others believe about this God. They believed, on the contrary, that God is utterly good. This is one of their fundamental, overarching convictions.”

- Iain Provan

Professor of Biblical Studies, Regent College

COMMON MISPERCEPTION

Jesus seems totally different from the God of the Old Testament. We frequently hear verses quoted such as Matthew 7:1 where Jesus says, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”

So, what gives? If we are to believe that the OT and the NT represent the same God, how should we think about the OT?

3 Important Issues for Understanding the OT

1. Culture/Context

2. Principle of Progressive Revelation

3. Nature of the OT Law

Culture (Context) Matters!

Culture – High context vs. Low context

”... the theology of the Old Testament cannot be properly understood without taking the ancient Near Eastern cognitive environment into account. The Israelites were embedded in the ancient world, and they thought like ancient people. God communicated to them in that ancient world and used that which was familiar to them to communicate. Therefore, the theology revealed to them, true as it is, is clothed in ancient garb.

- John H. Walton
Professor of Old Testament, Wheaton

Culture (Context) Matters!

High-Context versus Low-Context Communication

”In *high-context communication*, the author and audience share much in common and can communicate with minimal explanations;.... In contrast, *low-context communication* describes a situation in which very little can be assumed about the basic knowledge of the audience. ... The authors of Scripture operate in a high-context setting. ... [W]e enter as a low-context audience.... Thus the theological substance of the Old Testament ... is embedded in culture.”

- John Walton

Therefore, we must study the cultural background to be able to understand the text as the original audience would have.

Progressive Revelation

God Progressively Reveals Himself

“God, as it turns out, speaks his word into specific contexts, in specific ways. And as the author of Hebrews says (in Heb. 1) the revelation given in the past was **partial and piecemeal**, and the whole of the revelation must be evaluated in light of the fullest revelation of God that comes out in Christ himself.”

- Ben Witherington III

Professor of New Testament Studies, Asbury Theological Seminary

“... there is no contrast between the Old and New Testaments. While we learn more about God and our relationship with him as we move to the New Testament, the development can be described by words like *progress*, *growth*, and *deepening* but not *correction*. We do not go off in a different direction, but rather we go further in the same direction.”

- Tremper Longman III

Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

Progressive Revelation

God's Accommodates Human Limits and Fallenness

- “Accommodation”, sometimes called “condescension,” has come down to the level or capacity of humanity to make himself understood.
- In the Bible, we see various examples of God accommodating human misunderstanding

Examples: cosmic geography (construction of the universe), divorce (see Matt. 19)

Old Testament Law

- Old Testament Law is often categorized as follows*:
 1. Ceremonial law – deals with priesthood initiation and the priestly procedures as they relate to the Tabernacle/Temple and various sacrifices for the cleansing of the people
 2. Civil law – deals mainly with relationships between individuals, the settling of disputes and the description of proper behavior
 3. Moral law – based on the character of God; extends beyond the OT to the NT

* Some laws will overlap these categories

Old Testament Law

It is important to understand that many of the laws in the OT are similar to case law. This means that they are giving example of *principles* and how those principles work out in a specific situation. The reader is then to understand the principle, so that they might apply it to different situations.

Example: Deuteronomy 22:1-4

Old Testament Law

“An incremental redemptive-movement ethic means that God often brings his people along in at least *incremental* steps relative to the world around them (foreign movement) or relative to earlier stages in the redemptive story line (canonical movement).”

- William Webb, Professor of Biblical Studies, Tyndale Seminary
- Gordon Oestle, Professor of Old Testament, Tyndale Seminary

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Basic:

This Strange and Sacred Scripture: Wrestling with the Old Testament and its Oddities – Matthew Richard Schlimm

Confronting Old Testament Controversies: Pressing Questions about Evolution, Sexuality, History and Violence - Tremper Longman III

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

The Watermark Equipping Podcast – Various Episodes

Advanced:

Opening Israel's Scriptures – Ellen F. Davis

On the Reliability of the Old Testament – K. A. Kitchen