

Luther Knox – East Tennessee State University.

Luther is an English and Public Health major at ETSU and can be reached at knoxlc98@gmail.com.

A Merciless Deity?

An Examination of the Old Testament Reveals a Different God than Typically Depicted

Many Americans today have the notion that the God revealed in the Old Testament is wrathful and unjust, a God far different from the gentle Jesus we read about in the New Testament. Oxford scientist and author Richard Dawkins seems to epitomize this view. He writes in *The God Delusion*, “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” (Dawkins 31).

It would benefit Dr. Dawkins and everyone else who holds these views to have a holistic grasp of what the Old Testament has to say about God. When we attain such a grasp, we understand that the God in the Old Testament is portrayed as just, loving, and merciful instead of hatefully unjust.

It is also essential to understand the characteristics of Jesus—that He is indeed merciful, but that He is also a judge who pronounces condemnation. Moreover, examining the New Testament reveals that Jesus is the one through whom God performs His two ultimate acts toward mankind: salvation and judgment. He is the one through whom all things will one day be reckoned once for all, resulting in either life or judgment.

This understanding is essential in defending the textual veracity of the Bible. People will not believe in the Bible if they hold the misconception that the God in the Old Testament is unjust and antithetical to Jesus in nature. I hold firmly to the Bible as a Protestant Christian and student of the Scriptures. Because I hold so highly the character of God as revealed in the Bible,

I wish for all to come to a correct understanding of the God who has revealed Himself in this Book.

The Character of the Old Testament God

To begin, I need to establish God's character as revealed in the Old Testament, and then I will address His actions. He is *merciful*. When God gives Moses the commandments on Mount Sinai, He tells Moses in Exodus 34:6-7, speaking in third person, "Yahweh—Yahweh is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin." King David, who is credited with writing most of the Psalms, echoes the same language in Psalm 103:8-11:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
 slow to anger and rich in faithful love.
 He will not always accuse us or be angry forever.
 He has not dealt with us as our sins deserve
 or repaid us according to our offenses.
 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 So great is His faithful love toward those who fear Him.

The prophet Isaiah declares his God to be a God of forgiveness and compassion in Isaiah 55:7:

Let the wicked one abandon his way
 and the sinful one his thoughts;
 Let him return to the Lord,
 so He may have compassion on him,

and to our God, for He will freely forgive.

There are many other passages I could point to describing the Hebrew God's loving and merciful nature, such as Psalm 23:6, 25:6-7, 51:1-2, 86:5, 15; II Chronicles 30:9; Jeremiah 3:12; Micah 5:7; Nehemiah 9:17-21, 31; Numbers 14:18; and Joel 2:13.

Secondly, God is not only depicted as loving, but also *just*. There are numerous verses that testify to this. In Genesis 18:25, Abraham pleads with God to spare the city of Sodom for the sake of his nephew Lot and his family, saying, "Won't the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" We see here a man close to God acknowledging His justice. According to Isaiah 30:18, "the Lord is a just God." Again in Isaiah 61:8, in God's revelation to Isaiah, He declares, "For I Yahweh love justice; I hate robbery and injustice."

This same God is also *perfect*, as described in Psalm 18:25, "with the blameless man You prove Yourself blameless." There is also the famous charge in Leviticus 19:2, "Be holy because I, Yahweh your God, am holy," wherein "holy" (שׁוֹדֵק) is defined by Strong's Concordance as "sacred (ceremonially or morally); (as noun) God (by eminence), an *angel*, a *saint*, a *sanctuary*:—holy (One), saint" (Strong 102). In other words, perfect.

It stands to reason that a God who is just and perfect would not tolerate sin. A single violation of His principles would demand punishment. Yet we do not see punishment for every single sin. When we see people in the Old Testament breaking the commands God gave and not receiving punishment, that is pure mercy.

People holding Richard Dawkins' view may point to God's interactions with His people to prove that God is being unjustly harsh to impose such rules. They might point to the hefty law given to Moses at Mount Sinai that told the Jews how to live. This law covers most of the first five books of the Bible. Or they could point to the painful ordinance of circumcision given to

Abraham as the sign of God's covenant with him. Surely, you'd think God is being unjust to impose such taxing regulations on His creatures.

However, as Martin Luther pointed out, there is a pattern of grace preceding law in the Old Testament—every time God gives a law to His people, it is after He has already given them grace. For example, God gives Abraham His ordinance of circumcision in Genesis 17:11:

This is My covenant, which you are to keep, between Me and you and your offspring after you: Every one of your males must be circumcised. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin to serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and you.

Some might object, saying that God is too harsh on Abraham and his family to give him such a drastic command. But just a few chapters before, God had called him out of his native land, giving him a gracious promise:

Go out from your land,
your relatives,
and your father's house
to the land that I will show you.
I will make you into a great nation,
I will bless you...
and all the peoples on earth
will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12:1-3).

God had graciously called Abraham out of his pagan country, into a relationship with Him, and given him the promise to bless the people groups on the earth through him. This was all grace toward Abraham before giving him the sign of circumcision to keep. God's grace is such an

important theme in the Old Testament that it precedes law; God is not simply rewarding people who do good.

Another notable example of grace before law is the exodus. Most of us are familiar with the account of God's plagues on Egypt to deliver Israel from slavery (Exodus 7-14). It is not until after this that God gives the Israelites the Law through Moses (starting in Exodus 20). Once again, we see the pattern of God giving his people grace before giving them a law. God rescues both Abraham and the Israelites before setting up His rules.

If critics do not bring up the laws God gives His people, they may well bring up the punishments He inflicts on them, such as on Adam, or Nadab and Abihu. Let us look at these in greater detail.

Before Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, God allows him to live in the garden, enjoying His perfect creation and fellowship with Eve and Himself. This was all grace to Adam. Therefore, when God expels him from the garden, let us not think of God as too harsh. God had told him, "you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die" (Genesis 2:17). God does not kill Adam on the day he disobeyed Him. Instead, God kills an animal to clothe his shameful nakedness: "The LORD God made clothing out of skins for Adam" (Genesis 3:21). This was God's grace to him.

Nadab and Abihu are the sons of Aaron, a Levite. They die in Leviticus 10: "Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his own firepan, put fire in it, placed incense on it, and presented unauthorized fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them to do" (Leviticus 10:1) Just afterward, "fire came from the Lord and burned them to death before the Lord" (2). While this punishment may seem unjust, let us examine the context.

Moses' words to Aaron following his sons' deaths are, "This is what the Lord meant when He said: I will show My holiness to those who are near Me, and I will reveal My glory before all the people" (Leviticus 10:1-3). Moses is saying this incident is about God's glory. For a vivid picture of the glory of God that Moses is referencing, let us look at Exodus 19—God descending onto Mount Sinai:

When morning came, there was thunder and lightning, a thick cloud on the mountain, and a loud trumpet sound, so that all the people in the camp shuddered. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was completely enveloped in smoke because the Lord came down on it in fire. Its smoke went up like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain shook violently. (Exodus 19:16-19).

This God who so powerfully manifested His power commanded Moses:

Go down and warn the people not to break through to see the Lord; otherwise many of them will die. Even the priests who come near the Lord must purify themselves or the Lord will break out in anger against them. (Exodus 19:21-22).

That God orders that the priests purify themselves before coming into the Lord's presence and that non-priests not approach at all testifies to God's perfect holiness. He has the perfect right to give these commands regarding the holiness of His presence.

Let us apply some simple logic. Because God had revealed Himself as holy and worthy to be obeyed, His people had an obligation to obey Him. Nadab and Abihu committed a grievous offense against God by disobeying the sacrificial laws given in Leviticus 1-8, not to mention that their sin took place right after God accepted an offering with a dramatic spectacle of glory: "[f]ire came from the LORD and consumed the burnt offering... [W]hen all the people saw it,

they shouted and fell facedown on the ground” (Leviticus 9:24). Would not this display of God’s power motivate them to respect the God they were called to serve? They received exactly what was warned: “the Lord will break out in anger against them” (Exodus 19:22). And no record exists of Moses or Aaron complaining about God’s justice.

The Character of Jesus

Now that we have looked at God in the Old Testament, let us look at Him in the new, in the character of Jesus. This Jesus is often claimed to be a different, kinder God than the God seen in the Old Testament, but a closer look at the New Testament shows otherwise.

Many people understand Jesus to be humble and docile, perhaps thinking of verses such as Luke 18:16: “Let the little children come to Me, and don’t stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Though most people would recognize His merciful character, I will discuss His mercy and define it as I feel people by and large do not correctly grasp the mercy of Jesus depicted in the New Testament.

Jesus offers *common grace* and *saving grace*. Common grace is grace toward all people, even those who don’t believe. Common grace is any grace besides saving grace. One way Jesus demonstrates this common grace throughout His ministry is through healing numerous people, many of whom did not trust Him as Savior. For example, we have no record that the sick and crippled man Jesus heals in John 5:5-9 ever believed in Him. In Luke 6:17-19, Jesus heals many people and casts out many demons. In fact, “The whole crowd was trying to touch Him, because power was coming out from Him and healing them all.” Even though He heals many on that day, there is no mention of any of them believing in Him. Moreover, in John 13 Jesus even washes

the feet of Judas, who certainly did not believe in Him! God the Father Himself offers, and has offered, common grace to all for millennia: “The LORD is good to everyone; His compassion rests on all He has made... The LORD is faithful in all His words and gracious in all His actions” (Psalm 145:9, 13). As Jesus testifies about Him, “He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). God’s common grace is indiscriminately towards both those who believe and those who don’t.

But Jesus also offers saving grace—a special grace to those who accept His free gift of salvation on His terms. Though we can in no way merit salvation, Jesus makes it clear there is a cost factor in following Him. Following Him means “[taking] up [your] cross,” and the cross in the first century was a symbol of death (Mark 8:34). When Jesus uses this intense language with His disciples, He is in effect telling them to prepare to die if they follow Him. Paul leaves no question either as to the cost factor. He writes, “all those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

What can we take from these verses in regard to salvation? Jesus freely offers salvation to all who trust in Him, yet He warns of the cost of following Him in this life. He illustrates this cost in the parable of the hidden treasure: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, buried in a field, that a man found and reburied. Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field.” Jesus is that treasure, and those who trust in Him and follow Him, in a manner of speaking, give up everything they have to do so. Yet as Jesus points out, they do it *joyfully*. Those who love Him consider Him more than worth what they lose in this life, as did the man who sold all he had to buy the field to obtain its treasure. This is Jesus’ saving grace.

Jesus’ mercy is clear, but there is much more to understand about Him. According to John 5:22, “[God the Father] has granted [the Son] the right to pass judgment, because He is the

Son of Man.” This verse tells us that Jesus is a judge who will indeed pass judgment. Matthew 7:21-24 shows what this will look like:

Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?’ Then I will announce to them, ‘I never knew you! Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!’

This reminds us of the Old Testament God’s character we looked at: we see both mercy and judgment in Jesus. Moreover, we need to realize that Jesus inflicts far more judgment than God does in the Old Testament. Looking in the last book of the New Testament, in Revelation 19:11-16, John tells us what he sees in a vision:

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse. Its rider is called Faithful and True, and He judges and makes war in righteousness... A sharp sword came from His mouth, so that He might strike the nations with it... He will also trample the winepress of the fierce anger of God, the Almighty. And He has a name written on His robe and on His thigh:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS

We immediately read of an angel crying out to the birds:

Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of commanders, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of their riders, and the flesh of everyone, both free and slave, small and great. (17-18).

The angel is telling the birds to get ready to gorge themselves on the flesh of the people Jesus will kill with the sword coming from His mouth, and indeed “all the birds were filled with their flesh” (21).

In the next chapter of Revelation, we read the scene of the judgment on the final day, commonly known as “The Great White Throne Judgment:”

I also saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life, and the dead were judged according to their works by what was written in the books... And anyone not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.
(20:12-15).

As the God in the Bible is perfectly just, He must take care of sins once for all. He cannot merely sweep sins under the rug and forget about them. His punishment is violent and wrathful, but not unjust. These sinners receive what they deserve, as Paul writes, “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). This is why sinners must be punished in Revelation.

Jesus as God’s Vehicle for Forgiveness and Judgment

But there is a seeming problem here—not all sinners are punished here in Revelation. As David writes in Psalm 103:10, “[The LORD] has not dealt with us as our sins deserve or repaid us according to our offenses.” The moral problem is that a just God cannot leave the sin of David and others unpunished. Yet as David declares, He does not punish them according to their sin.

We can find the answer to this dilemma in the New Testament book of Romans, where Paul writes: “[i]n His restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. God presented

[Jesus] to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:25-26). This verse proclaims that God did pass over the sin of David and others: “God passed over the sins previously committed.” However, God would not leave the sin unpunished forever as He laid the punishment on Jesus: “God presented [Jesus] to demonstrate His righteousness.”

God had to present Jesus as the sacrifice for sin in order that sins be forgiven. The only way God can be just and still forgive sinners is by meting out their judgment on a willing substitute—someone who as a perfect human can stand in their place and who has an infinite nature that enables him to pay a sin debt due an infinite God. The only man to ever live who is qualified to be this perfect sacrifice is God’s own Son, Jesus Christ.

Thus, in Jesus are the combined aspects of God we previously established—God’s *love* toward sinners in *forgiving* their sin and His *justice* in *punishing* it, with Jesus as the channel through which God performs these acts. God’s aspects such as mercy, love, and also wrath and justice are present throughout both testaments of the Bible, and the love and justice of God meet in Jesus for the sake of helpless sinners.

Annotated Bibliography

The Bible. The Holman Christian Standard Bible, 6th ed., Holman Bible Publishers, 2010.

The Bible contains 66 books, 39 of them comprising the Old Testament. The 39 books can be categorized in four sections: the Law (Genesis-Deuteronomy, 5 books), History (Joshua-Esther, 12 books), Poetry (Job-Song of Solomon, 5 books), and Prophecy (Isaiah-Malachi, 17 books). The New Testament contains 27 books: 4 Gospels, Acts, 21 epistles, and Revelation. The complete Bible is estimated to have been written down over a period of a few thousand years by around 40 individual writers.

Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.

In this book, Dr. Richard Dawkins, Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, presents his arguments for atheism. Dawkins' purpose in writing the book is "to raise consciousness." Dawkins writes about four conscious-raising issues: that to be an atheist is a brave, splendid, and realistic aspiration; to understand natural selection and other 'cranes' that help in understanding the universe; the issue of religion and childhood; and atheist pride.

Strong, James. *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1890.

Strong's Concordance has been long established as a valuable resource for citing the Bible. Most of its contents consist of the Main Concordance, a lengthy reference section in which one can

find exactly where a given word appears in the King James Bible. Following the Main Concordance is a Comparative Concordance, wherein Strong lists the differences between the King James Version and the Revised Version, a revision of the King James Version published by Oxford in 1885. The following sections are the Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible and Dictionary of the Greek New Testament, wherein Strong systematically lists the words of the Bible in the original languages, provides an English transliteration for them, and gives a brief definition of the words in English.