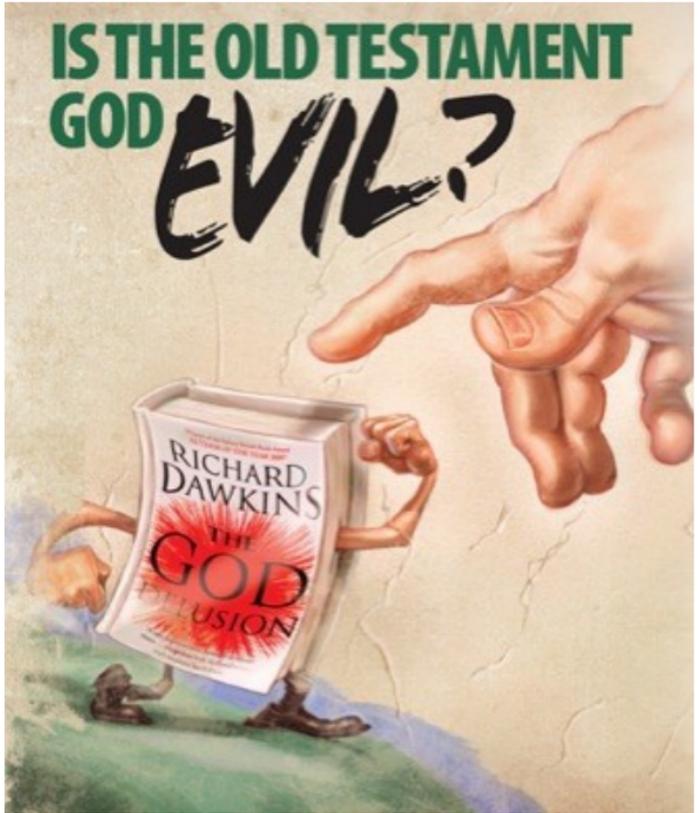


Is the Old Testament God Evil?

Are the charges made by the New Atheists a distorted



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representation of Old Testament ethics or is God a moral monster, as the New Atheists says He is?

By Paul Copan

INTRODUCTION

The God of the Bible is a good God who demonstrates His love for people by giving His Son for the salvation of those who believe (John 3:16). The New Atheists, however, think differently. They question God's goodness by raising abundant complaints about Old Testament (OT) ethics. Richard Dawkins thinks that Yahweh is a moral monster: "What makes my jaw drop is that people today should base their lives on such an appalling role model as Yahweh — and even worse, that they should bossily try to force the same evil monster (whether fact or fiction) on the rest of us." Yahweh's commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is both "disgraceful" and tantamount to "child abuse and bullying." Yahweh breaks into a "monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirted with a rival god," resembling "nothing so much as sexual jealousy of the worst kind." Add to this the killing of the Canaanites — an "ethnic cleansing" in which "bloodthirsty massacres" were carried out with "xenophobic relish." Joshua's destruction of Jericho is "morally indistinguishable from Hitler's invasion of Poland," or Saddam Hussein's massacres of the Kurds and the

Marsh Arabs." Beside all this, we have to contend with the "ubiquitous wierdness of the Bible" as well as the moral failures and hypocrisies of biblical characters: a drunken Lot seduced by and engaging in sexual relations with his daughters (Genesis 19:31–36); Abraham's twice lying about his wife Sarah (Genesis 12:18,19; 20:1–18); Jephthah's foolish vow that resulted in sacrificing his daughter as a burnt offering (Judges 11).¹

According to Christopher Hitchens, the now-forgotten Canaanites were "pitilessly driven out of their homes to make room for the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel." Moreover, the OT contains "a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human animals."²

Sam Harris boldly asserts that if the Bible is true, we should be stoning people to death for heresy, adultery, homosexuality, worshipping graven images, and "other imaginary crimes." Referring to Deuteronomy 13:6–11, Harris claims that the consistent Bible-believer should stone his son or daughter if she comes home from a yoga class a devotee of Krishna. Furthermore, once we recognize that slaves are human beings who are equally capable of suffering and happiness, we will understand that it is "patently evil to own them and treat them like farm equipment." Indeed, we can be good and recognize right and wrong without God or the Bible: we can know objective moral truths without "the existence of a lawgiving God" and can judge Hitler to be morally reprehensible "without reference to scripture."³

I argue that these charges made by the New Atheists are a distorted representation of OT ethics, which fail to consider issues such as the earliest creational ideals (Genesis 1,2), the warm moral ethos of the OT, the ancient Near East (ANE) context, the broader biblical canon, and the metaphysical context to undergird objective morality. I have attempted elsewhere to address at both scholarly and popular levels the various OT ethical questions — slavery, the Canaanite issue, killing Canaanites vs. Islamic jihad, "harsh" moral codes and "strange" levitical laws, Abraham's offering Isaac, the imprecatory psalms, divine jealousy, divine egotism, and so forth.⁴ I only offer a broad overview here.

A RESPONSE TO THE NEW ATHEISTS

Biblical scholar John Barton warns that there can be no "simple route" to dealing with OT ethics.⁵ John Goldingay sees Israel's unfolding history as broken up into five distinct stages or contexts — wandering clan, theocratic nation, monarchy, afflicted remnant, and post-exilic community of promise. Each one of these requires distinct rather than uniform moral responses.⁶ Thus, a proper response calls for greater attention to a range of relevant factors the New Atheists' crass hermeneutic and left-wing fundamentalism completely ignore.

1. Mosaic law and historical narratives

A plain reading of Israel's priestly/legal codes reveals that they are embedded within a broader historical narrative. Unlike other ANE cuneiform legislation, God ultimately instructs Israel, not by laying down laws or principles, but by telling stories of real people as they relate to their Creator and Covenant Maker. Ideally, God's moral character and His activity in Israel's history give the nation a necessary ethical framework to shape its way of life. This is in contrast to the prologue/epilogue to Hammurabi's Code, which, rather than offering historical narrative, contains lofty language about Hammurabi's being endowed by the gods as a benevolent earthly sovereign to be a just ruler on earth.

As we will see below, the critics' assumption that Israel's holiness code offers an ultimate, universal ethic is misguided.

Dawkins' claims that biblical characters are often deeply flawed may win him points in the "rhetoric" category, but he is not saying anything with which Christians disagree. Such moral blackballing loses him points when he ignores many moral, noble actions of the biblical characters — Abraham's magnanimity toward Lot; Joseph's moral integrity; David's refusal to touch King Saul, despite the opportunities; Nathan's courage to confront David the adulterer. Indeed, many biblical narratives tend to confirm our moral intuitions, which reveal how biblical characters are often a mixed moral bag.

Thus, Christopher Hitchens' remarks about "the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel" are accurate. St. Paul observes as much in 1 Corinthians 10. Many of Israel's stories involving stubbornness, treachery, and ingratitude are vivid negative role models — ones to be avoided. The OT's descriptions ("is") do not necessarily amount to prescriptions ("ought").

2. The Mosaic law, human sin, and divine ideals

Bruce C. Birch observes that the ANE world — its slavery, polygamy, war, patriarchal structures, kingship, and ethnocentrism — is "totally alien" and "utterly unlike" our own social setting. He advises us to acknowledge this impediment: "these texts are rooted in a cultural context utterly unlike our own, with moral presuppositions and categories that are alien and in some cases repugnant to our modern sensibilities."⁷ The new atheism ignores what Christians most likely affirm — that Mosaic legislation is not the Bible's moral *pinnacle* but rather a *springboard* anticipating further development or, perhaps more accurately, a *pointer back* to the loftier moral ideals of Genesis 1 and 2 and Genesis 12:1–3. These ideals affirm the image of God in each person, lifelong monogamous marriage, and God's concern for the nations. The moral implications from these foundational texts are monumental, though Israel's history reveals a profound departure from these ideals.

Consequently, the believer need not justify all aspects of the Sinaitic legal code. After all, God begins with an ancient people who have imbibed dehumanizing customs and social structures from their ANE context. Yet Yahweh desires to treat them as morally responsible agents who, it is hoped, *gradually* come to discover a better way. He does this rather than risk their repudiating a loftier ethic — a moral overhaul — that they cannot even understand and for which they are not culturally or morally prepared. As Goldingay puts it: "God starts with his people where they are; if they cannot cope with his highest way, he carves out a lower one."⁸ This kind of progression, as we shall see, is not biblical relativism, as some allege. Indeed, we see unchangeable biblical ideals highlighted from the very beginning of the Scriptures (Genesis 1:26,27; 2:24), which are reaffirmed throughout.

3. Mosaic law, Cuneiform law, and moral improvements

Collections of cuneiform law include the laws of Ur-Nammu (c. 2100 B.C., during the Third Dynasty of Ur); the laws of Lipit-Ishtar (c. 1925 B.C.), who ruled the Sumerian city of Isin; the (Akkadian) laws of Eshnunna (c. 1800 B.C.), a city 100 miles north of Babylon; the laws of Hammurabi (1750 B.C.); and the Hittite laws (1650–1200 B.C.) of Asia Minor.⁹ Despite parallels between these and Mosaic law codes and even certain improvements in ANE codes over time, some significant differences also exist. We have in the Mosaic law some genuine, previously unheard-of *improvements*.

Slaves in Israel, unlike their ANE contemporaries, were given radical, unprecedented legal/human rights — even if not equaling that of free persons. As the *Anchor Bible Dictionary's* essay on "Slavery" observes, "We have in the Bible the first appeals in world literature to treat slaves as human beings for their own sake and not just in the interests of their masters." By comparison, "the idea of a slave as exclusively the object of rights and as a person outside regular society was apparently alien to the laws of the ANE," where slaves were forcibly branded or tattooed for identification. Indeed, in "contrast to many ancient doctrines, the Hebrew law was relatively mild toward the slaves and recognized them as human beings subject to defense from intolerable acts, although not to the same extent as free persons."¹⁰

Another unique feature of the Mosaic Law is its condemnation of *kidnapping* a person to sell as a slave — an act punishable by death (Exodus 21:16; cp 1 Timothy 1:10). This is a point lost on, or ignored by, those who compare slavery in Israel to that in the antebellum South. While Israel was commanded to offer safe harbor to foreign runaway slaves (Deuteronomy 23:15,16), Hammurabi demanded the death penalty for those helping runaway slaves (Â§16).

As an aside, some have alleged that Paul's returning the runaway Onesimus to his alleged owner Philemon is a step backward toward Hammurabi. This is a false charge. For one thing, there is scholarly debate on the question of whether or not Onesimus was a slave. For one

thing, there are no “flight” verbs in this letter, and this “runaway slave” interpretation did not emerge until the fourth century.

Moreover, Paul had declared that in Christ there is “neither slave nor free” (Galatians 3:28), and he elsewhere appeals to Christian masters — who have their own heavenly Master — to treat their slaves justly, impartially, and without threatening (Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1). And if slaves can gain their freedom (1 Corinthians 7:21), Paul encouraged this. Surely, this is dramatic departure from Hammurabi.

Hebrew (debt) slaves — which we could compare to indentured servanthood during the founding of America — were to be granted eventual release in the seventh year (Leviticus 25:35–43) — a notable improvement over other ANE law codes. This release was to be accompanied with generous provisions and a gracious spirit (Deuteronomy 15:9). The motivating reason? “[Y]ou were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today” (Deuteronomy 15:12–18, NASB¹¹, esp. verse 15). Even if the poverty could not be eradicated, Deuteronomy 15’s overriding, “revolutionary” goal is *that there be no debt slavery in the land at all* (verses 4,11).¹²

Concerning the ANE’s inferior *sexual morality*, we are familiar with the condemnation of the Canaanite female and male cult prostitutes (cp. Genesis 38:15,22,23; Deuteronomy 23:17,18; also Hosea 4:14). Many ANE cuneiform laws, however, permitted activities that undermined family integrity and stability by allowing men to engage in adulterous relations with slaves and prostitutes. The laws of Lipit-Ishtar of Lower Mesopotamia (1930 B.C.) take for granted the practice of prostitution (e.g., ¶ 27,30). In Hittite law (1650–1500 B.C.), “If a father and son sleep with the same female slave or prostitute, it is not an offence.” (¶ 194)

Not only do we find morally inferior cuneiform legislation, but also its attendant harsh, ruthless *punishments*.

For certain crimes, Hammurabi mandated that tongue, breast, hand, or ear be cut off (¶ 192,194,195,205). Beside punishments such as cutting off noses and ears, ancient Egyptian law permitted the beating of criminals (for, say, perjury or libel) with between 100 and 200 strokes.¹³ Contrast this with Deuteronomy 25:1–3, which sets a limit of 40 strokes for a criminal.

What of Scripture’s emphasis on *lex talionis* — an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? First, except for capital punishment (“life for life”), these texts (Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:17–22; Deuteronomy 19:16–21), are *not taken literally*. Each example calls for (monetary) compensation, not bodily mutilation. Later in the New Testament (NT), referring to this language that was being used as a pretext for personal vengeance outside the lawcourts, Jesus himself did not take such language literally (Matthew 5:38,39) — no more than He took literally the language of plucking out eyes and cutting off hands if they lead to sin (Matthew 5:29,30). Second, this principle served as a useful guide for exacting proportional punishment and compensation; this was designed to prevent blood feuds and disproportionate retaliatory acts.

Additionally, the increased complexity and stringency of Mosaic regulations is a divine response to Israel’s disobedience. From the beginning, the earliest legislation (Exodus 21–23) was intended to be simple and much less harsh — comparable to patriarchal religion (cp. Jeremiah 7:2,3; Galatians 3:19,22). However, the greater stringency of the ensuing laws is the result of three things: (a) Israel’s refusal to approach God at the mountain as a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6), instead sending Moses as their mediator; (b) Aaron’s failure as high priest in the golden calf incident (Exodus 32), resulting in a tightening of priestly restrictions (Exodus 35 through Leviticus 16); (c) the people’s worship of the goat idols (Leviticus 17:1–9), resulting in more severe laws for the community (Leviticus 17:10–26:46).¹⁴ Consider how a rebellious child will often need external rules, severe deadlines, and close supervision to hold him over until (hopefully) an internal moral change takes place. Rules, though a stop-gap measure, are hardly ideal.

Although the New Atheists belittle the Mosaic Law for its ruthless strictness, it is an *accommodation* to a morally undeveloped ANE cultural

mindset — with significant improvements — as well as a response to the rebellious, covenant-breaking propensity of the Israelites.

4. The Mosaic law, Israel's history, and varying ethical demands

I have noted the shift from an ancestral wandering clan to a theocratic nation, then to a monarchy/institutional state/kingdom, an afflicted remnant, and finally a post-exilic community/assembly of promise. Each stage offers enduring moral insights — faithfulness/covenant-keeping, trusting in God, showing mercy. Our focus, though, is on the varying ethical demands on God's people. For example, in the first stage, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are apolitical characters (except for Abram's rescuing Lot in response to an invasion/raid [Genesis 14]). After Israel's 400-year wait, including bondage in Egypt, until the sin of the Amorites reaches full measure (Genesis 15:16), they became a nation. This required land to inhabit. Yahweh fought on Israel's behalf while bringing just judgment on an irredeemably Canaanite culture and religion that had sunk hopelessly below any hope of moral return — with the rare exception of Rahab and her family and the Gibeonites at the end of Joshua 9. As Leviticus 18:28 declares, the land would "spew out" its inhabitants, and Israel itself was subject to the same judgment.

"Holy warfare" is perhaps the most emotionally charged point raised by the New Atheists. It is primarily located in the second stage — and not throughout Israel's OT history. So let me offer a few comments here. First, Israel would not have been justified to attack the Canaanites without Yahweh's explicit command. Yahweh issued His unique command in light of a morally sufficient reason — the intractable wickedness of Canaanite culture and the moral and spiritual danger it posed.

Second, as I argue elsewhere,¹⁵ we have strong archaeological evidence that the targeted Canaanite cities such as Jericho and Ai were not population centers with women and children, but military forts or garrisons that protected noncombatant civilians in the hill country — namely, soldiers and political/military leaders — although occasionally female tavern keepers (e.g., Rahab) could be found in these citadels. Indeed, the terms "city" (*'ir*) and "king" (*melek*) were typically used in Canaan during this period to refer, respectively, to "fortress/garrison" and "military leader." In addition, Jericho probably had about 100 or fewer soldiers in this outpost (which is why the Israelites could encircle it seven times in one day and then do battle against it). So if Jericho was a fort, then "all" those killed therein were warriors — Rahab and her family being the exceptional noncombatants dwelling within this militarized camp. The same applies throughout the Book of Joshua. Moreover, the attacks on cities were more like "disabling raids," not acts of utter decimation, as Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen argues: "these campaigns were essentially disabling raids: they were not territorial conquests with instant Hebrew occupation. The text is very clear about this."¹⁶

Third, the "obliteration language" in Joshua (e.g., "he left no survivor" and "utterly destroyed all who breathed" [Joshua 10:40, NASB]) and in early Judges is clearly hyperbolic — another stock feature of ANE language. Consider how, despite such language, the latter part of Joshua itself (along with Judges 1) assumes plenty of Canaanites still inhabit the land (e.g., Joshua 23:12,13).

Fourth, the biblical language of the Canaanite "utter destruction" is identical to that of Judah's destruction in the Babylonian exile. So utter annihilation or even genocide is completely inaccurate. Indeed, God threatened to "vomit" out Israel from the land just as he had vomited out the Canaanites (Leviticus 18:25,28; 20:22). In the Babylonian invasion of Judah (sixth-century B.C.), God threatened to "lay waste the towns of Judah so no one can live there" (Jeremiah 9:11). Indeed, God said, "I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin" (Jeremiah 25:9, NASB). God "threatened to stretch out My hand against you and destroy you" (Jeremiah 15:6, NASB; cp. Ezekiel 5:16) — to bring "disaster" against Judah (Jeremiah 6:19). In Isaiah 43:28, the Lord uses this term *herem* ("[consignment to the] ban") in an exaggerated fashion: "So I will pollute the princes of the sanctuary, and I will consign Jacob to the ban and Israel to revilement" (NASB). The biblical text, supported by archaeological discovery, suggests that while Judah's political and religious structures were ruined and that Judahites died in the conflict, the urban elite were deported to Babylon while many "poor of the land" remained behind to inhabit the towns of Judah. Clearly, Judah's being

“completely destroyed” and made an “everlasting ruin” (Jeremiah 25:9) was a significant literary exaggeration — which reinforces our point about the Canaanite “destruction.”

In Deuteronomy 7:2–5, we see from that wiping out Canaanite religion was far more significant than wiping out the Canaanites themselves.¹⁷

What of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15? Were they totally destroyed? Apart from keeping animals and king Agag alive, Saul said he had obeyed God (verse 20). What’s more, at the end of the book David is fighting an army of Amalekites, and over 400 soldiers escaped (30:17). Clearly, no “total destruction” was in view. The same is true of the Midianites in Numbers 31. After the seduction of Israel by Midian, “every male” Midianite was killed (verse 7). Is this literal? Not at all. We see in Judges 6:5 tells us that the Midianites (and their camels) were too numerous to count.

Fifth, we should take seriously the numerous references of “driving out” the Canaanites (e.g., Exodus 23:28; Leviticus 18:24; Numbers 33:52; Deuteronomy 6:19; 7:1; 9:4; 18:12; Joshua 10:28, 30,32,35,37,39; 11:11,14) or “dispossessing” them of their land (Numbers 21:32; Deuteronomy 12:2; 19:1; etc.). We then read in Joshua of repeated affirmations that Joshua did all that Moses commanded (Joshua 11:12,14,15,20). But if he did so, and many Canaanite survivors remained, then clearly Moses did not intend this to be literal either.

Sixth, God’s difficult command regarding the Canaanites as *a limited, unique salvation-historical situation* is in some ways comparable to God’s difficult command to Abraham in Genesis 22. Yet, we should no more look to the divinely mandated attack on Canaanites as a universal ideal for international military engagement than we should look to Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac as a timeless standard for “family values.” Behind both of these hard commands, however, is the clear context of Yahweh’s loving intentions and faithful promises. In the first place, God had given Abraham the miracle child Isaac, through whom God promised to make Abraham the father of many. Previously, he saw God’s provision when he reluctantly let Ishmael and Hagar go into the wilderness — with God reassuring Abraham that Ishmael would become a great nation. Likewise, Abraham knew that God would somehow fulfill His covenant promises through Isaac — even if it meant that God would raise him from the dead. Thus Abraham informed his servants, “we will worship, and then we will come back to you” (Genesis 22:5 [NRSV¹⁸]; cp. Hebrews 11:19).

With the second harsh command regarding the Canaanites, Yahweh has already promised to bring blessing to all the families of the earth without exclusion (Genesis 12:1–3; 22:17,18) and desires to include Israel’s most-hated enemies in this blessing (e.g., Isaiah 19:25). This should be set against the background of Yahweh’s enemy-loving character (Matthew 5:43–48; cp. Exodus 34:6) and worldwide salvific purposes. In both cases, we have a good, promise-making God who has morally sufficient reasons for issuing these commands.

5. The Law of Moses, the biblical canon, and moral undertones

The New Atheists tend to assume that the Mosaic Law is comprehensively normative for the consistent Bible believer. This huge presumption misses the flow of biblical revelation. I will address this on a number of fronts.

First, we are not to equate Mosaic legislation with the moral. Laws are often a compromise between the ideal and the enforceable. The Mosaic Law is truly a moral improvement on the surrounding ANE cultures — justifiably called “spiritual” and “good” (Romans 7:14,16) and reflective of Yahweh’s wisdom (Deuteronomy 6:5–8). Yet it is *self-confessedly* less than ideal. Contrary to New Atheists’ assumptions, the Law is not the permanent, fixed theocratic standard for all nations.

Polygamy, for instance, is practiced — contrary to God’s ideals in Genesis 2:24 and contrary to the prohibition in Leviticus 18:18 — perhaps in part because its prohibition would have been difficult to enforce, even if the biblical writers hoped for something better (cp. Deuteronomy 17:17; 1 Kings 11:3). Like divorce and other inferior moral conditions (cp. Matthew 19:8), polygamy was tolerated rather than upheld as an ultimate moral standard.

Second, the Mosaic Law reveals God's forbearance because of human hard-heartedness. Matthew 19:8 indicates that divorce was permitted — not commanded — because of hard hearts; it was not so “from the beginning.” The same can be said of a strong patriarchy, slavery, and warfare common in the ANE context; these are in violation of Genesis 1,2's creational ideals. Rather than banishing all evil social structures, Sinaitic legislation frequently assumes the practical facts of fallen human culture while pointing Israel to God's greater designs for humanity.

God shows remarkable forbearance in the OT: “He passed over the sins previously committed” (Romans 3:25, NASB); elsewhere Paul declares: “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30,31, NASB). In the OT, God puts up with sinful human structures as less-than-ideal.

Third, the Mosaic Law — an improved, more-humanized legislation — attempts to restrain and control an inferior moral mindset without completely abolishing these negative structures. While negative aspects of slavery are retained, slaves achieve astonishing rights in contrast to the rest of the ANE. Even so, Deuteronomy 15 expresses the hopeful goal of eventually eradicating slavery while both (a) diminishing the staying power of slavery in light of the exodus and (b) controlling the institution of slavery in light of the practical fact of misfortune in a subsistence culture could reduce anyone to poverty and indebtedness.¹⁹

The same kind of progression is evident in legislation regarding women, primogeniture, and the like.

Fourth, the Mosaic Law contains seeds for moral growth, offering glimmers of light pointing to a higher moral path. Yes, God prohibits worship of other gods, but His ultimate desire is that His people love Him wholeheartedly. Love is not reducible to the Law's restraining influence, and enjoying God's presence is not identical to idol-avoidance.

The model of Yahweh's character and saving action is embedded within and surrounding Israel's legislation — a “compassionate drift” in the Law, which includes protection for the weak, especially those who lacked the natural protection of family and land (namely, widows, orphans, Levites, immigrants and resident aliens); justice for the poor; impartiality in the courts; generosity at harvest time and in general economic life; respect for persons and property, even of an enemy; sensitivity to the dignity even of the debtor; special care for strangers and immigrants; considerate treatment of the disabled; prompt payment of wages earned by hired labor; sensitivity over articles taken in pledge; consideration for people in early marriage, or in bereavement; even care for animals, domestic and wild, and for fruit trees.²⁰

In their zealous preoccupation with the negative in OT ethics, New Atheists neglect these warm undertones in the Law of Moses itself, exemplified in Yahweh's gracious, compassionate character and His saving action.

Fifth, the Mosaic Law contains an inherent planned obsolescence, which is to be fulfilled in Christ. Despite the significant moral advances at Sinai, the Law is not the final word. God promised a new covenant that would progress beyond the old (e.g., Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 36,37). According to Hebrews, Jesus brings “substance” to the OT's “shadows,” fully embodying humanity's and Israel's story. Thus, stopping at OT texts without allowing Christ — the second Adam and the new, true Israel — to illuminate them, our reading and interpretation of the OT will be greatly impoverished. If the NT brings out more fully the heart of God, then we must not let the “tail” (the OT) wag the “dog” (the NT) as the New Atheists commonly do.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that Christians can readily acknowledge that the Mosaic Law is not the ideal, ultimate ethic. However, let me make a couple of statements regarding the New Atheists' trivialization of Yahweh and the inconsistency between their “objective” moral outrage and naturalism.

First, like Narnia's Aslan, gracious and compassionate Yahweh (Exodus

34:6) is not to be trifled with. He is good, but not "safe." The New Atheists resist the notion of Yahweh's rightful prerogatives over humans; they seem uncomfortable with the idea of judgment or cosmic authority. Yet God must reveal himself with holy firmness (at times, fierceness) to get the attention of human rebels — including Israel (Deuteronomy 9:6,7).

Dawkins' charge that God's breaking into a "monumental rage" when Israel "flirted with a rival god" is "sexual jealousy of the worst kind" seems to diminish the meaning of the marriage covenant — and, in particular, this unique bond between God and His people. Israel had not simply "flirted" with rival gods, but cohabited with them, "playing the harlot" (cp. Ezekiel 16 and 23); Israel did so on the "honeymoon" (Exodus 32). Hosea's notable portrayal of Israel as a prostitute — no mere flirt — is quite serious despite Dawkins' casual dismissal. The appropriate response to adultery is anger and hurt (cp. Isaiah 5:4; 65:2,3; Ezekiel 6:9). When there is none, we rightly wonder how deeply and meaningfully committed to marriage one truly is.

Second, despite Dawkins' moral outrage, his metaphysic disallows it, admitting that a universe full of electrons contains "no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference."²¹ Indeed, science "has no methods for deciding what is ethical." Individuals and society decide.²² Naturalism does not have the metaphysical resources to move from valueless matter to value (including rights-bearing human beings and objective morality/moral duties). Theism is immensely better equipped metaphysically to provide such a context.

Harris' attempt to "demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity" is quite ironic for a several reasons: (a) biblical theism has historically served as a moral compass for Western civilization's advances despite historical deviations from Jesus' teaching (e.g., the Crusades, Inquisition). (b) Despite the New Atheists' appeals to science, they ignore the profound influence of the Jewish-Christian worldview on the West's scientific enterprise. In Paul Davies' words, "Science began as an outgrowth of theology, and all scientists, whether atheists or theists ... accept an essentially theological worldview."²³ (c) The New Atheists somehow gloss over the destructive atheistic ideologies that have led to far greater loss of human life within just one century than "religion" (let alone "Christendom") with its wars, Inquisitions, and witch trials. Atheism has proven to be a far more destructive force than "religion." (d) Though Harris correctly defends knowledge of objective moral truths "without reference to scripture," he misses the greater point of how human value and dignity could emerge given naturalism's valueless, mindless, materialist origins. All humans are God's image-bearers, morally constituted to reflect God in certain ways; so atheists and theists alike can recognize objective right/wrong and human dignity — without special revelation (Romans 2:14,15). Naturalists still lack the proper metaphysical context for affirming such moral dignity and value.

Though OT ethics presents certain challenges, we have seen that the New Atheists often overstate and distort them. Their typical rhetoric and often-simplistic arguments may score points with popular audiences, but their assertions present a lopsided picture of OT ethics and Yahweh's character.



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Notes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 248,242,243,247,241.
2. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 101,102.
3. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 18,19,23,24.
4. Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2011).
5. John Barton, *Ethics and the Old Testament* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998), 7.
6. See ch. 3 in John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).
7. Bruce C. Birch, "Old Testament Ethics," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Leo G. Purdue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 297.
8. John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, 86.
9. See ch. 3 in Joe M. Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2004).
10. Muhammad A. Dandamayev, s.v. "Slavery (Old Testament)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
11. Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission (www.Lockman.org).
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