

Engaging the Severe Judgments in the Bible?

Series: Getting to Know THE BOOK that Knows Me
Brad Bailey – February 12, 2017

Four elements, primarily in the Old Testament, that can challenge our moral sense and understanding.

- Commands and Punishments, particularly the penalty of death for various violations.
- Lack of moral confrontation and clarity regarding Israel's ancient cultural patterns including polygamy and slaves.
- Sacrifices – particularly Abraham to sacrifice his son.
- Destruction of enemies – particularly the conquest of Canaan

A couple initial cautions...

- Be careful of simplifying what is serious and sobering.
- Be careful of the breivty of big accusations...which can use emotionally loaded words to falsely summarize the facts.

Pull back to see the whole story.

1. Ever since our break from God, the Bible gives the account of both God's judgment and mercy; the OT also testifies of God's mercy, and the NT also testifies of His judgment.

2. God neither creates nor seeks that which brings violencerather He seeks to have everything united with Him in peace ("shalom") and will see that such peace ("shalom") will come.

3. God is calling a people (Israel) out from a world which has lost it's moral bearing ... and what unfolds is God sowing moral reality in a process of relationship.

"God relates to Israel as a parent to a growing child, with greater clarity and consequences through their formative years."

4. God is never bringing random judgment, but rather is always moving forward towards the redemption of all, which we can see even in the conquest of Canaan.

- Canaan was a land with various groups of similar ethnicity occupying it, from which the Israelites had likely been one such group, now returning.
- The Canaanite culture had reached a height of cultural and religious

depravity and destruction

- God had made Himself known...and given the Canaanites generations in which to respond.
- God shows the opportunity for escape in the saving of Rahab
- God declares that Israel is not inherently better than those in Canaan
- Israel fulfilled its calling, and was never again told to conquer & expand.

5. The ultimate focus of understanding is Christ, the incarnate Son, the "exact representation of Gods' being," in whom justice and mercy finally and fully meet.

Hebrews 1:1-3

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Hebrews 12:18-25, 28-29

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned."²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?...

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."

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Series: Getting to Know THE BOOK that Knows Me

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Intro – We’ve begun this new year with a focus on the foundations we are building our lives upon. We may not of our lives as something we are building...but every day we make choices based on what we believe is sound and solid.

And we recognize that Jesus **never rooted his life** in the **human ideas or institutions**. He was **rooted in something** he understood as the only source that is ultimately solid and unchanging, and that is **what God has established and expressed. He rooted his life in God’s Word.**

He tells that parable of two lives who each built homes... one on sand...one on rock...and when they faced life’s storms and winds...**the results showed how significant** their choice of foundations was.

So it’s in the midst of a world where everything seems to feel **more uncertain...more fragile** and **fleeting**...that we are **starting this year** focusing on **building our lives on what is truly solid.**

And today we are continuing our series entitled: Getting to Know THE BOOK that Knows Me.

Today I want to engage the more challenging aspects of this Book....this divine story.

In recent years...the about 10 to 15 years... there was what many referred to as the **rise of “the new atheists.”** In particular, there were three individuals who wrote books that sought to be revolutionary...**Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and the late Christopher Hitchens**

It began with the 2004 publication of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* by Sam Harris. **Harris was motivated by the events of September 11, 2001,** which he laid directly **at the feet of Islam...**he was clear that **all religion was bad.** [1]

While humankind has seen the God of the Bible as the source of ultimate good...the one who demonstrates His love for people by giving His Son for the salvation of those who believe (John 3:16). The **New Atheists question God’s goodness by declaring how immoral the ethics and actions** of the Old Testament are. Essentially they are saying, “You shouldn’t believe this because it can justify horrible actions like this.”

Sam Harris says that... If the Bible is true, we should be stoning people for “imaginary crimes.” Richard Dawkins says that he God of the Bible is a “moral

monster"...and commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is both "disgraceful" and tantamount to "child abuse and bullying."

Dawkins has promoted that the God made known in the Bible "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."

While fewer seem to be joining this platform of late... they have sown new seeds in the culture. I can hear the echoes of such thought amidst cultural dialogue...through my neighbor who after 9/11 often wanted to express his thought that ... "a little religion is good...but the problem is too much religion." At first glance that may seem a reasonable idea. People who fly planes into building seem to be too serious about what they believe. But look any deeper and you discover that that it may be just the opposite. It is rooted in groups who want power and use God in shallow way to give their pursuit authority. Or its's individuals who have no sense of purpose... trying to attach themselves to something God-given. It's the shallow self-serving use of religion that seems to justify evil... so the problem may be too little religion.

I believe that if one considers how they characterize what the Bible actually tells us...you will find they have **so mischaracterized the actual facts** that it **questions their own integrity**. **However...** they very **aspects of the Bible which they focus upon....**can challenge our moral sense and understanding. I would summarize that there are...

Four elements, primarily in the Old Testament, that can challenge our moral sense and understanding.

- **Commands and Punishments, particularly the penalty of death for various violations.** (We can't imagine facing death for spiritual and moral rebellion.) [2]
- **Lack of moral confrontation and clarity regarding Israel's ancient cultural patterns including polygamy and slaves.** (God seems to guide them towards better practices regarding marriage and slavery and justice...but why didn't he just confront and clarify the ideal from the start? It can be used to suggest that the Bible accepts

such behavior.)

- **Sacrifices – particularly the call to Abraham to sacrifice his son.**
- **Destruction of enemies – particularly the conquest of Canaan.** (Is what is described simply the genocidal destruction of innocent lives?)

These raise significant questions in our relationship to the Bible...and ultimately God.

- **Is the God we meet in the Old Testament really the God which Jesus and the New Testament represents?**
- **How can we understand the severe judgments in the Old Testament?**
- **Is the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, describing God as a “moral monster” who arbitrarily calls for the destruction of innocent life, or is there a larger moral context that is involved?**

A couple initial helpful cautions...

- **Be careful of simplifying such issues....**because at some level they are a serious matter... they effect how we know God. If we want to know God...really know Him....we can just ignore what we aren't comfortable with. We may never understand it all...but the more we can understand....the more we can think clearly and soberly. And ultimately it may be essential to how we grasp the cross...the suffering of God.

But also....

- **Be careful of the brevity of big accusations...which use emotionally loaded words to falsely summarize the facts.**

The key to understanding is always context...seeing the whole story.

We can never understand anything clearly when we are told of an action without the context of the larger story.

There are valid issues to raise...but these can be so obviously stripped of the facts just to make a dramatic accusation. And that becomes naturally intimidating. To respond to something that sounds so powerfully simple... without a quick comeback...can leave is feeling foolish...or weak.

But here's the truth... if the problem with the accusation is that it uses brevity to make a cheap jab...then there is no quick response that can be fitting. We need more of the story...not less.... to really understand the truth.

If the same atheist is confronted with the profound atrocities of that have flowed from the few rulers rooted in atheism ... particularly Stalin and Marx... who executed as many as 100 million human lives... their likely response will begin by saying that such a correlation is too simplistic... and that they need to unpack the whole story. [3] And they are right to do so. But the point is that simplistic accusations often feel more powerful than they ultimately are. So beware of the way in which one line quips may seem potent.... not because they clarify truth...but because they remove truth. [3b]

For example, when God calls Abraham to sacrifice Isaac... to those who have never read the whole story...it can sound like a clear picture of God being brutal and heartless....of a blood-thirsty craving for child sacrifice. But if one really reads the story... it becomes clear that God never truly intended Abraham to kill his son – and that Abraham recognized this fact from the beginning. And the larger context helps us understand what Isaac represented and the stage of faith that this was calling for.

So the most helpful way to understand the Biblical Story...this revelation of God that can lead us to salvation and wisdom...is to...

Pull back to see the whole story.

The Bible tells a larger story.

I want to offer **a few points that can flow from that process of pulling back and seeing the larger picture.** The issues raised are far bigger than we can engage fully or fairly in our **brief time**....but I want to share a few points that might offer some clarity to our understanding. **These are some markers on a trail...they help place boundaries points that at least keep the trail clear...in this case the trail of our minds.**

They are reasons why I personally have come into a relationship with the living God revealed in this story.... not just despite such actions...but even because they force me to face myself more honestly.

They are likely part of the reason that so many who have been touched and transformed by the profound love of God have not been bound by these actions.

Look more closely and we will discover that...

1. Ever since our break from God, the Bible gives the account of both God's judgment and mercy; the Old Testament also testifies of God's mercy...and the New Testament also testifies of His judgment.

If we just hear the highlights then we can see strong and even stern commands...severe consequences...in the way God relates in the Old Testament... with floods and wars... and then God in Jesus caring for children and the poor and healing. But if we are really reading it all... we see that right from the start...God has been choosing to save humanity... to suffer with humanity...even when humanity was so defiant and darkened that it is hard to imagine the mercy that was at hand. And he calls for loving their enemies and treating the poor with dignity and justice. And when we look at Jesus... we can see that judgment lies in the backdrop of the very mercy he brings...it is a call to repent or faces consequences ...and ultimately we hear warnings of the judgment to come. [4]

This may not resolve how we understand the severe judgment we read of....but it helps us to see that it is not simply an issue of the Old Testament...not some evolving ideas that got a bit too disconnected.

“It may enlighten our perspective to recognize that Jesus, and the writers of the New Testament, never complain about the severity of judgments in the Old Testament....rather they see the ultimate triumph of mercy over the true and just weight of judgment.”

This helps us to ask...Are WE more morally sensitive than Jesus and the New Testament writers? Did they see something in the Old Testament that we miss?

It suggests that the way we tend to want to see these two separate portrayals...between God who needs to bring judgment and God who doesn't...is not what they understood.

Secondly...we see that...

2. God neither creates nor seeks that which brings violence....rather He seeks to have everything united with Him in peace (“shalom”) and will see that such peace (“shalom”) will come.

If you want to understand someone's intent....look at what they chose to create before anything corrupted it. What we see is that the God created a world peace...the Hebrew word is "shalom" which means everything in peace with itself...and that is precisely what God says He is going to see fulfilled. The God of creation **created a world of beauty** that is beyond what all intelligence could create....beyond what random nature could create...and he **created relationship** rooted in love...and united in peace. "Shalom" is everything in unity. And that is what He declares is going to be the end.

Everything in between is how He restores creation to that end. A basic truth to keep in mind is that...

"All actions which are in response to the actions of another must be considered in relationship to the alternative options."

In other words...**what God enacts is not simply a reflection of God's ideal...but of God engaging human posture and practices.**

It's interesting that the most common question humans raise is: why does God allow evil...why doesn't He end it? Then we raise this counter question: How could God bring such destruction upon to those who did evil?

I think there is a tendency to accuse God of not doing things in an easier way... but we don't really have a way that actually resolves the problem. It's beyond us to know how to restore the problem without just destroying it all.

- We might say that we want God to level justice upon all that is not good...but then we want to qualify that good so that it doesn't include us.
- We might say we want God to simply destroy all that is defiant against His good. But that might not leave much as well.

So what is at hand is not simply of God's making ...but of God working with the actions and hearts of humanity. [5]

And I have come to sense that...

There is a level of human responsibility and divine redemption that we in our human nature are not quick to see or sense.

When I read of God enacting **severe consequences**....I may find them hard to accept because **I assume these lives** have not done something to deserve it. I may **want to call some “innocent”**....a word we may throw around too easily...or at least **“not really bad”**....and likely it’s the way I want to see myself as well. [6]

I can’t help but thinking of how Richard Dawkins describes God as breaking into a “monumental rage” when Israel “flirted with a rival god” ...like “sexual jealousy of the worst kind.” When the truth is that God had just dramatically and soberly brought devastation to the Egyptians to free the Israelites from slavery....leads them out....gives them the boundaries to live as free people well....starting with stay faithful...“Don’t go worship any false gods”...and they are off building and worshipping a golden calf . That sound to me more like the faithful spouse on their honeymoon finding their partner in bed with someone else. And Dawkins sounds more like the unfaithful spouse trying to blame the faithful spouse for having a problem with it. [6b]

And this may be where we have some sobering up to do.

Maybe what we are uncomfortable with, is the reality of our own sinour own responsibility.

That’s always a part of understanding that we should at least be willing to consider.

A third point we discover as we pull back...

3. God is calling a people (Israel) out from a world which has lost it’s moral bearing ... and what unfolds is God sowing moral reality in a process of relationship.

It might be helpful to recognize that **God is not relating to modern western civilization** which has been deeply **shaped by the Bible itself**... it’s view of persons...of justice...of and so much more. Rather, God **begins by calling one man out from a world** that was **far darker than we can imagine**. They have lost their moral compass....and so every facet of life is unrooted from God’s order. They have **no developed moral bearings**...rather they have been shaped by the world they are a part of.

So... We cannot read the Old Testament commands as simply a universal and ultimate moral code that God hands the people.

The commands of God begin amidst the common ancient near east culture.

So some laws seems strange because they were the application of principles applied to their ancient near eastern culture.

And **what we see is a movement**...from some moral ethics shared by various cultures of the time...to **more of what sets Israel apart** in their **value for all people**...their treatment of slaves... the poor...the foreigner....the disabled....and even the animals they are stewards of.

The original 10 Commandments are the big posts... they can serve like central coordinates ...and as the people fail to grasp the point... God brings further clarity and stronger consequences. [7] It could be said that....

“God relates to Israel as a parent to a growing child, with greater clarity and consequences through their formative years.”

We can take the **example of polygamy**.... men having multiple wives.

God brings Adam and Eve together and sets forth such a monogamous union as the foundation for human life to flourish. God himself models His covenant love for His people through expressing it in the ideal union of marital faithfulness between husband and wife without any outside competition. But Abraham and his people don't know any of this yet. They don't have the book of Genesis.

Polygamy was a cultural norm in the ancient near east ...and in the days of the Kingdom of Israel, it was particularly the way of kings and wealthy men to take plural wives. A harem was one of the symbols of royalty. But God forbade polygamy for the kings of Israel. (Deut. 17:14-19) Saul failed to honor this...as did David...but he suffered the consequences ...and he not only ended his life with what appears to be only one wife...but ended the practice of having concubines. (2 Sam. 20:3.) And ultimately Jesus would set any attempt to dishonor monogamy right by calling people to go back to what God had designed and desired “from the beginning.” (Mat. 19:8-9).

So...it would appear that polygamy may be an example where God "puts up with" some things that were the lesser of evils....ultimately inferior....while moving people toward the moral ideal. Polygamy may be an example where people confuse what “is” as what “ought to be.” [8] Just because something is done in Israel doesn't mean that it's blessed by God or reflects God's ideal. **'Is' does not equal 'ought.'** Just because something is **described** doesn't mean it is being **prescribed** as well.” [7b]

So when some might want to judge the moral codes in terms of providing a weak ideal for a universal and ultimate moral ethic...as they generally know...that is not what was being given. God was bringing unknown moral bearings into play according to stages and situations.

And as we look at the limitations of such rules to change the heart of people effectively... God knows that more than any. The laws are never the ideal. The ideal is that all creation is restored in relationship with God... rules merely serve as a temporary post or protection towards that end.

The Old Testament laws given to Israel prepare the way for one who will come and enter into their culture...and provide a living law in the heart.

4. God is never bringing random judgment, but rather is always moving forward towards the redemption of all, which we can see even in the conquest of Canaan.

When God calls the people to prepare to now return to Canaan and become a nation given the land He promised... it involves conquering those who have taken control of the land.

Is this a call to genocide...of ethnic cleansing? It may appear similar to some of what we see in the modern world where one ethnicity simple tries to remove another entirely.

However, **zoom in** and there is **more at hand**. Let me note a few elements that help us understand this story.

Canaan was a land with various groups of similar ethnicity occupying it...and from which the Israelites had likely been one such group....now returning.

The land of Canaan was inhabited by many people groups...and most view it at the very land in which Abraham was from...where the Israelites began...before their sojourn to Egypt. (Genesis 12-50) So the Israelites were not outsiders trying to take a land from its original owners. They came from the same place, spoke a similar language, and they looked alike. So this is not simply a matter of a new group trying to take the land away from the indigenous people.
[9]

The Canaanite culture had reached a height of cultural and religious

depravity and destruction [10]

The Canaanites' sin, which included child sacrifice, was so repellent that God said,

“The land vomited out its inhabitants” - Leviticus 18:25

God had made Himself known...and given the Canaanites generations in which to respond.

God clearly explains that the Canaanites had come to know of God and His power...that He had delayed the people arriving to the land...giving the Canaanites 400 years to respond. [11] It becomes clear that they knew of what the God of Israel had done for His people...and many feared...but they refused to surrender.

God shows the opportunity for escape in the saving of Rahab

The first story of Joshua is about the salvation of a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab and her family. Why is this the opening story? Clearly, the narrator wants to emphasize that this war has nothing to do with ethnicity. God's longing is to save the Canaanites, not judge them. We are also meant to wonder — since it is the opening story — how many other Rahabs there were in the history of the conquest whom we're not told about. [12]

God declares that Israel is not inherently better than those in Canaan

The next major story in the book has the same point: Joshua sneaks close to the walls of this camp and suddenly a figure is nearby him with a sword... one representing God... and Joshua asks:

Joshua approached Him and asked, “Are You for us or for our enemies?”
“Neither,” He replied. “I have now come as commander of the LORD's army.” **Joshua 5:13-14 (HCSB)**

This is the clearest denouncing of any idea that Israel was ethnically favored or had anything that implied that they were superior. [13]

Israel fulfilled its calling...to become established in one land...and was never again told to conquer nor expand.

This one is quite strange. Israel was never urged to expand its borders. The conquest was a **particular moment in history** — a **particular action** for a **particular time and place**. And it is not repeated. Unlike most conquering nations in ancient times, there is no evidence Israel tried to expand into other places.

Still....we may wonder... **how can I reconcile the severity by which God acts...with the mercy I see in Jesus?** We may still wonder as we read of such punishment and sacrifices and severity...

Is that you, Jesus? Which takes us to the heart of the matter.

5. The ultimate focus of understanding is Christ, the incarnate Son, the “exact representation of Gods’ being,” in whom justice and mercy finally and fully meet. [15]

We read in Hebrews chapter 1...

Hebrews 1:1-3 (NIV)

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Thus begins the Book of Hebrews. **Ultimately I meet God in what is brought forth as the “radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being”a greater and clearer “representation” of His nature.**

This speaks profoundly to our desire to know God.

When difficult to understand who God is... look at Jesus...

He is the focus – when you want to see something clearly... use a magnifying glass....what lies on the edges may be fuzzy but center is clear. In the same way we can keep the **magnifying glass of our faith** focused on him. What surrounds him is important... but when we linger only on the margins....with matters that are hard to see clearly... there is always clarity back at the center... on Jesus. [15b]

Look at Christ...and the cross. All talk of God must filter there. All views of God must refract there. All theology must converge there.

And Hebrews sees no contrast in God. There is no Old Covenant versus New Covenant God. There is no God of Moses versus God of Jesus.

As Mark Buchanan notes, Over its 13 chapters, the writer builds a **compelling case** for Jesus' **complete solidarity** with frail and sinful humans and yet his **utter superiority over everything that breathes**—over angels, prophets, high priests, Moses.

"In the past" is one of the book's refrains. **"But now"** is another. In the past, God spoke and acted through prophets, through angels, through priests, through Moses. But now, God speaks and acts through his Son, Jesus, who is superior to all others.

Jesus reveals God like no other. Jesus speaks for God like no other.

He is the focus...and he is also the fulfillment [16]

After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Hebrews draws a vivid contrast between past and present, Moses and Jesus, the Old Covenant and the New. In every way, Jesus—what he says, what he does, what he inaugurates, what he consummates—is superior to whomever and whatever has come before him. The past is a mere shadow of Christ's present reality and future glory.

All of this ties together as Hebrews wends toward its conclusion. There, the contrast between past and present, Moses and Jesus, Old and New rises to a brilliant crescendo:

Hebrews 12:18-24 (NIV)

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them,²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned."²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Jesus ushers in a **new day** and a **new way**. **In the past, we trembled** before this God. But now we can approach him with **joy, with confidence, with singing**.

The **blood of Abel cried out** that it was **human violence that had begun**...it was **man's injustice** which must be reckoned with. But the **now the blood of Christ** declares that God Himself has provided a way of resolve. God's justice has been met by God's mercy in Himself.

As long as we have recorded history...human life has seen that there is suffering...deemed the right of the gods... and they assume that the gods must not know or care about the suffering from the created perspective. But God says...if it doesn't seem right it's because it isn't right...it is life separated.... And God begins to engage an undeserving humanity....He calls out a people and sets them apart for his purposes....He begins to re-orient them to understand their true sources and moral bearings... and finally...he reconciles justice and mercy.

Everything has changed...not because God has changed...but because God's judgment has now been FULLY met by His mercy. The one thing that has not changed///is we stand responsible before God for how we respond to such mercy.

Hebrews 12:25, 28-29 (NIV)

²⁵ See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?....

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."

The God of the universe is a consuming fire... not because is is bad ...but because He sis so good that anything that is not set right with Him will be consumed. And having provided a way to be right with Him...His calling bears only more weight: ***Do not refuse me when I am talking to you.***

Resources: I have drawn from reading many articles and works....some of which I have drawn over direct portions connected to the points I was making...and try to give references to most. The most thorough recent work on this topic is that of Paul Copan "*Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God.*" My references to Copian however, are more directly drawn from his "Is the Old Testament God Evil?" article (at http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201203/201203_034_Good_God.cfm) which itself is abridged from chapter 9 of *God Is Great, God Is Good: Why Believing in God Is Reasonable and Responsible* edited by William Lane Craig and Chad Meister. Copyright(c) 2009

In contrast to my message which attempts to address all aspects of what might be deemed “severe judgments” I would recommend a 4 part series: James White sermon series “The Bloody Bible” – available at <http://www.churchandculture.org/media.asp>

Other articles and resources include:

Adam Hamilton - GOD’S VIOLENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE PROBLEM - <http://www.adamhamilton.org/blog/gods-violence-in-the-old-testament-the-problem/#.WJQvBFUrKUI>

Why did God condone such terrible violence in the Old Testament? - <https://www.gotquestions.org/Old-Testament-violence.html>

Can We Trust the God of Genocide? - Mark Buchanan - <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/july-august/can-we-trust-god-of-genocide.html>

Phillip Cary - "[Gentiles in the Hands of a Genocidal God.](#)"

Christopher J. H. Wright "[Learning to Love Leviticus](#)" and

Old Testament Mass Killings by Paul Coulter - <http://www.bethinking.org/bible/old-testament-mass-killings>

7 Keys to Understanding Violence in the Old Testament – By Lawson Stone
<http://www.seedbed.com/violence-in-the-old-testament-starting-points/>

Notes:

1. They are referred to as the “new atheists” because while there certainly had been atheists before...these atheists are focusing on bringing an end to religion in culture. They are not those who simply do not believe... who might suggest that they wish they could believe... and who want to respect those who do...but rather the new atheists are less focused on what they believed and more focused on those who do... they bear a more “militant” call to war on religion... with calling to promote secularism.

For some similarities to past atheism, see The Pillars of Unbelief—Sartre, by Peter Kreeft: http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/pillars_sartre.htm

A good summary of how the “new atheism” voices unfolded and united is provided in the Wikipedia article - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Atheism

Another article I found valuable in understanding the background and context of the new atheist voices, is: We can save atheism from the New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris by [Jeff Sparrow - https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/30/we-can-save-atheism-from-the-new-atheists](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/30/we-can-save-atheism-from-the-new-atheists)

While fewer seem to be joining this platform of late... they have sown new seeds in the culture. I can hear the echoes of such thought amidst cultural dialogue...through my neighbor who after 9/11 often wanted to express his thought that ... “a little religion is good...but the problem is too

much religion.” (He appreciated my response...that it may be just the opposite... it’s the shallow self-serving use of religion that seems to justify evil... so the problem may be too little religion.)

2. Regarding the penalty of death: Adam Hamilton summarizes, “There are numerous “crimes” for which God, through the Law of Moses, requires the death penalty. Among these are sacrificing to a god other than Yahweh (Exodus 22:20), persistent rebelliousness on the part of a child (Deuteronomy 21:18–21), a child who hits or curses his or her parents (Exodus 21:15 and 17), working on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2), premarital sexual intercourse (Deuteronomy 22:13–21), and the requirement for a priest to burn his daughter alive if she became a prostitute (Leviticus 21:9).

In addition...there are instances in the Old Testament, God’s anger repeatedly burns against his people for their disobedience. At times, the punishment he dispenses seems particularly harsh, unjust, and disproportionate. Let’s consider just one example.

In 2 Samuel 24, we find that King David decided to take a census of the men of fighting age. The prophet Gad was sent to David to announce God’s displeasure with the taking of the census. The punishment for David’s sin: “The Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand of the people died” (2 Samuel 24:15). David makes a decision that does not please God, and God kills 70,000 Israelites for it. How could this action ever be reconciled with a God of mercy, compassion, justice, and love?

From Adam Hamilton - God’s violence in the Old Testament

<http://www.adamhamilton.org/blog/gods-violence-in-the-old-testament-the-problem/#.WJQvBFUrKUI>

James White provides the following examples of such punishments...

Leviticus 20: 5

“Anyone who dishonors father or mother must be put to death. Such a person is guilty of a capital offense. (Leviticus 20:9, NLT)

Again from Leviticus:

10 One day a man who had an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father came out of his tent and got into a fight with one of the Israelite men. 11 During the fight, this son of an Israelite woman blasphemed the Name of the LORD with a curse. So the man was brought to Moses for judgment. His mother was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan. 12 They kept the man in custody until the LORD’s will in the matter should become clear to them.

13 Then the LORD said to Moses, 14 “Take the blasphemer outside the camp, and tell all those who heard the curse to lay their hands on his head. Then let the entire community stone him to death. (Leviticus 24:10-14, NLT)

This from Numbers:

32 One day while the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they discovered a man gathering wood on the Sabbath day. 33 The people who found him doing this took him before Moses, Aaron, and the rest of the community. 34 They held him in custody because they did not know what to do with him. 35 Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must be put to death! The whole community must stone him outside the camp.” 36 So the whole community took the man outside the camp and stoned him to death, just as the LORD had commanded Moses. (Numbers 15:32-36, NLT) 6

This from Deuteronomy:

18 “Suppose a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or mother, even though they discipline him. 19 In such a case, the father and mother must take the son to the elders as they hold court at the town gate.

20 The parents must say to the elders, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious and refuses to obey. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’ 21 Then all the men of his town must stone him to death. In this way, you will purge this evil from among you, and all Israel will hear about it and be afraid. (Deuteronomy 21:18- 21, NLT)

Hamilton also notes that there are instances in the Old Testament, God’s anger repeatedly burns against his people for their disobedience. At times, the punishment he dispenses seems particularly harsh, unjust, and disproportionate. Let’s consider just one example.

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3. Regarding the atrocities under atheism, Dr. R. J. Rummel, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Hawaii, is the scholar who first coined the term [democide](http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/COM.ART.HTM) (death by government). Dr. R. J. Rummel's mid estimate regarding the loss of life due to communism is that communism caused the death of approximately 110,286,000 people between 1917 and 1987 - <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/COM.ART.HTM>

4. Brent A. Strawn notes that...

(1) The New Testament also has its share of violence and wrath—“mean God” kind of stuff for short. One need only think of the Book of Revelation, or the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), or sayings of Jesus that are far from “meek and mild” to get this point clearly (e.g., Matt 5:25-26; 10:34-36; 16:2-3; 23:1-36; Mark 10:38; Luke 12:49-53; 13:3, 5; 14:25-33; etc.).

(2) The Old Testament has just as much “nice God” kind of stuff as the New Testament. Indeed, much of the New Testament’s “niceness” comes directly from the Old Testament: The Great Commandment concerning the love of God and love of neighbor, for instance (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18), but also love for immigrants (Lev 19:34) and good deeds for one’s enemies (e.g., Prov 25:21; cf. Matt 5:39; Rom 12:20). Or, more directly to God’s wrath, consider Isaiah 54:7-10, which acknowledges God’s abandonment and anger “for a moment,” but now promises great compassion and everlasting love (vv. 7-8). It culminates in the statement that God will never be angry with Israel again—never, just as God will never flood the earth again (v. 9)! Then:

“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.” (v. 10)

What text anywhere else in the Bible could rival this one in raw mercy and unbounded grace?

From - TEACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT: WHEN GOD SEEMS UNJUST, By Brent A. Strawn

5. It is precisely in trying to judge God for resolving justice with mercy that we do well to accept that at some level is it beyond our understanding. I cannot presume to understand how infinite and ultimate justice can be reconciled with the injustice of the finite. We may need a reality check to grasp the upper limit of our ability to understand power, wisdom, and time.

As the Scriptures make clear...

Isaiah 55:8-9 (GW)

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways,” declares the LORD. “Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts.”

6. In regards to our tendency to be in denial of responsibility, I appreciate what Paul Copan brings out in Richard Dawkins indictment of God. Copan notes, “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.”

6b. As Paul Copan specifically notes, Israel had not simply “flirted” with rival gods, but been in

full adultery 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.”

7. Paul Copan says: – “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 misfortune in a subsistence culture could reduce anyone to poverty and indebtedness. (Copian cites McConville, *Grace in the End*, 148–9)

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

“... *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. (Copian cites Christopher J. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 310)

In a similar way, some critics state how flawed some actions by the characters in Israel’s history were... even when they know that the Bible isn’t declaring that action is good.

7b. Drawn from Paul Copan

8. On the issue of polygamy, Copan points to Leviticus 18:18 to show Mosaic Law prohibited polygamy. He contends that God "puts up with" some things that are inferior, while moving people toward the moral ideal.

Leviticus 18:18 (NIV)

"Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living.

9. Some historical analysis on Canaan also at - Who Were the Canaanites? By Owen Jarus, Live Science Contributor - <http://www.livescience.com/56016-canaanites.html>

10. The Burnt Offering of Children: Canaan and Israel - http://christ.org.tw/bible_and_theology/Bible/Burnt_Offering_of_Children.htm

11. God was patient with the Canaanites

This was no 'spur of the moment' decision by God. In [Genesis 15:13-16](#), God tells Abraham that his descendants will be slaves in a foreign country for 400 years but that they will return to the land of Canaan after "*four generations*". The reason given for this delay is because "*the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure*". At the time of Abraham there is evidence that the Canaanites had some knowledge of the true God:

- The judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were close to Canaanite territory, and the deliverance of Lot were evidence of God's judgement against sin ([Genesis 18-19](#)).
- Abraham lived among them and was a wealthy and powerful man (he was even able to rescue Lot from the united forces of four kings according to [Genesis 14](#)). His faith in God should have been a witness to the Canaanites.
- The mysterious Melchizedek was king of Jerusalem and also "*priest of God Most High*" ([Genesis 14:18](#)). He must surely have taught his people about the true Creator God ([Genesis 14:19](#)).
- It seems that over the period from Abraham to Joshua, the Canaanites had gradually rejected what they knew about God and moved deeper into sin. It was only when their sin reached a certain level of severity that God decided to use the Israelites to bring judgement on them. However, even at the time of Joshua, the Canaanites had heard about what God had done for the Israelites in delivering them from Egypt and giving them victory over the Amorite kings east of the Jordan ([Joshua 2:8-12](#)), yet they did not repent and turn to God.
- The book of Hebrews tells us that the Canaanites were "disobedient," which implies moral culpability on their part ([Hebrews 11:31](#)). The Canaanites were aware of God's power ([Joshua 2:10-11](#); [9:9](#)) and could have sought repentance. Except in rare instances, they continued their rebellion against God until the bitter end.

12. Phillip Cary notes that our position is more that of those destroyed than those who must

destroy. (Phillip Cary - "[Gentiles in the Hands of a Genocidal God](#)."0

In fact, with respect to the command to exterminate the Canaanites, our position is less like Israel's and more like that of Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute in Jericho who befriends the Israelite spies. She has not taken part in Israel's exodus, but she has heard of it and believes it. She knows the name of the Lord, the God who has given the land to Israel, and she confesses that he is God of heaven and earth (Josh. 2:9–11). When we see ourselves in Rahab, we recognize that we are those who deserve death, who have no hope for mercy but by faith in the God of Israel and his Son, Jesus Christ.

13. Deuteronomy 9 makes two things clear: One, God will give success to Israel's conquest "not because of your righteousness." And two, God was ousting the Canaanites "on account of the wickedness of these nations." This is not ethnic cleansing or favoritism. It is God's holy and just judgment. Israel is merely the tool — an obstinate tool — in God's temporal judgment.

14. More helpful insight into the conquest of Canaan...

From *Is the Old Testament God Evil?* By Paul Copan (taken and abridged from chapter 9 of *God Is Great, God Is Good: Why Believing in God Is Reasonable and Responsible* edited by William Lane Craig and Chad Meister. -

http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201203/201203_034_Good_God.cfm)

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

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.

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.

“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.

15. I had already decided to conclude this message by turning to Hebrews 1:1-3 because it personally serves my sense of focus and fulfillment upon Christ in such matters....but Mark Buchanan's article (Can We Trust the God of Genocide?) spoke even more profoundly about the way in which Hebrews as a whole, speaks to the tensions of the Bible's continuity amidst discontinuity. I have used much of his words here and while these are only notes (I do not memorize or read from notes but rather loosely convey them) I want to fully acknowledge his pastoral and theological wisdom in this point.

15b. The analogy of Jesus bringing clarity is drawn from Phillip Yancey

“For me Jesus has become the focal point of faith, and increasingly I am learning to keep the magnifying glass of my faith focused on him. In my spiritual journey I have long lingered in the margins, puzzling over matters like the problem of pain, the conundrum of prayer, providence versus free will. When I do so, everything becomes fuzzy. Looking at Jesus, however, restores clarity. For example, the Bible leaves many questions unanswered about the problem of pain, but in Jesus I see unmistakable proof that God is the God of all comfort, not the author of pain.” – From Yancey: The Encyclopedia of Theological Ignorance - <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/september6/9ta120.html>

16. See also:

Romans 3:25 (NLT)

For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, and

Acts 17:30-31 (NLT)

“God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. ³¹ For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”