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IS GOD A MONSTER?

NUANCED DIVINE AND HUMAN MORALITY IN HEBREW SCRIPTURES

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Review of Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

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One frequently repeated quote from Richard Dawkins' bestseller *The God Delusion* appears not only in follow-up books and reviews, but also on t-shirts, billboards, bulletin boards, and other media: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."¹

Paul Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* aims to redress Dawkins and related rhetoric that mocks or maligns God's character in Hebrew Scripture. Part one overviews so-called "New" or "Neo-Atheist" approaches to the Old Testament. Part two responds to charges that the Old Testament God is an arrogant bullying despot. Part three addresses Ancient Near East (ANE) contexts for Biblical kosher, civil, and ceremonial laws; along with Old Testament ordinances affecting women, polygamy, slavery, and war. Part four contends the Biblical God is a "Divine Foundation for Goodness," concluding from a Christian perspective that Jesus is "the Fulfiller of the Old Testament."² Copan supplies footnotes, recommended reading, and group discussion and study questions for each chapter.

In his introduction and part one, Copan explains his intent to explore and advance perennial issues in Old Testament ethics by utilizing, "the New Atheism movement as a springboard for discussion."³ Rather than sweepingly dismissing or condemning New Atheists, Copan sees Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, likeminded writers and their followers adding "'spice' to the God discussion," even when New Atheist arguments are less responsible than more restrained or scrupulous formulations.⁴

Part two, "God: Gracious Master or Moral Monster?" asks whether and how the Old Testament God is arrogant, jealous, or a bully. Copan identifies humility as realistic self-assessment (cf. Romans 12:3). For master cellist Yo-Yo Ma to insist he plays cello poorly would be false humility. Humble talented people neither boast, nor deny, nor degrade their abilities; but acknowledge God as the giver of them. On the other hand, God who is truly, infinitely, good and great, merits wholehearted devotion. Praising God or any other fountain of goodness and joy arises spontaneously and naturally from appreciation and enjoyment. People instinctively praise what they experience as beautiful, true, and good. One facet of God's glory in the Bible is that God sometimes acts with humility despite—or because of—God's infinite goodness and greatness. For Christians, divine humility culminates with God becoming human in Jesus' incarnation, humbling himself even to experience death on a cross (cf. Philippians 2).

Copan then diagnoses "jealousy" as a vice or a virtue depending on how it is expressed and motivated. In Hebrew Scripture, God is often

portrayed as “a concerned lover...full of anguish and dismay when his covenant people pursue non-gods...[essentially] rummaging around in the garbage piles of life and avoiding the ultimate source of satisfaction.”⁵

By analogy, a wife who is not jealous or angry if another woman attempts to seduce her husband is unlikely to be invested or committed to her marital relationship. Some jealousy and anger is appropriate, even commendable. Copan finishes part 2 by investigating ethical issues in Genesis arising from interrelationships among God, Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, and Ishmael.

Copan composes part three in thirteen chapters, first chiding New Atheists for “cultural snobbery” toward an Israelite society thousands of years and thousands of miles removed from the comparatively serene halls of early twenty-first century Euro-American academia.⁶ Copan asks readers to imagine how they would introduce human rights to nations accustomed to tyrannical or autocratic rule such as Saudi Arabia; or govern people with widespread overtly racist attitudes and established structures such as those in post-Civil war southern United States. “Think of the obstacles to overcome...simply changing the laws would not [immediately or comprehensively] alter thinking...you could probably imagine large-scale cultural opposition to such changes.”⁷ Wise change might be incremental. Likewise, in the Ancient Near East:

[The Biblical God adapted] ideals to a people whose attitudes and actions were influenced by deeply flawed structures...these laws weren't [presented as] the permanent, divine ideal for all persons everywhere...many products on the market [are] not intended to be...permanent. The same goes for the law of Moses...It looked forward to a new [and better] covenant (Jer. 31; Ezek. 36).⁸

Copan contends the Mosaic Law was a priceless but temporary measure (cf. Romans 7:12) exhibiting permanent moral insight and ideals to inform future laws and actions in fresh contexts. Furthermore, since “the Old Testament is full of [deeply flawed] characters...the way biblical characters *happen to act* isn't necessarily an *endorsement* of their behavior.”⁹

Similar considerations may be applicable to detractors' ridicule of, “The Bible's Ubiquitous Weirdness,” and criminal punishments in ancient Israel that seem harsh to contemporary readers, but were recurrently more humane even by twenty-first century standards than those implemented by cultures neighboring ancient Israel.¹⁰ This is especially evident in examples and prescriptions regarding women, children, and “slaves” in environments where severe patriarchal presuppositions flew in the face of the Biblical rights and privileges Copan documents from

Genesis to the Song of Songs extending to varied races, genders, and peoples.

But Copan does not merely muster and exegete Bible verses friendly to his thesis. He also tackles problematic passages. Copan's explications relating to women (two chapters) and slavery (three chapters) in the Old Testament are among his strongest. For example, Copan decisively demonstrates that "slavery" in the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament affirmed slaves and servants as their masters' fellow human beings, potentially comparable to employees or indentured servants working toward (re)manumission. This stands in stark contrast with Trans-Atlantic, African, and Asian chattel slavery perpetrated against Africans for many centuries by Europeans, Arabs, and their fellow Africans.

Copan then scrutinizes, "The Killing of the Canaanites" (three chapters) and "Does Religion Cause Violence?" (one chapter). Noteworthy features are the Bible's use of "Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric" which contained colorful, all-inclusive, non-literal language like, "utterly destroyed all who breathed."¹¹ Copan comments, "Just as we might say that a sports team 'blew their opponents away' or 'slaughtered' or 'annihilated' them, the author (editor) [of the book of Joshua] likewise followed the rhetoric of his day."¹²

Recognizing Biblical literary features and genres does not denigrate or compromise the Bible. It facilitates reading the Bible more accurately. Copan conveys the Israelite-Canaanite clash as incorporating Israel's struggle to survive aggressive warfare surrounding or directed at them, Israel extending amnesty to non-combatants and allies such as "Rahab, the Tavern Keeper" (traditionally referred to as Rahab, the prostitute), Israel often seeking peaceful coexistence, and honoring even highly inconvenient treaties.¹³ Provisional practices and laws in the Bible, even when falteringly applied, improved immensely on other regional codes of the era.

Copan asserts that when considering whether religion causes violence, specific religions individually or specific variants or aspects of religions must be evaluated rather than "generic religion as though all religions are alike."¹⁴ Is the designated mischief or mayhem central to, nuanced within, neutral, or contrary to a *particular* religion or sect's principles and teachings?

Controversially, Copan contrasts the Canaanite wars and medieval Crusades with Islamic jihad. Copan sees Hebrew wars with the Canaanites as geographically limited to the "Promised Land," as primarily occurring within one generation of Israelites encountering an utterly depraved and belligerent culture, and as "not intended to be normative and ongoing, but unique."¹⁵ Copan presents the Crusades as violating Jesus' teachings, as waged within a two-hundred year period endeavoring to recapture land once governed and occupied by Christians.

Copan construes militant jihad as ongoing since the time of the Muslim prophet Muhammad five hundred years prior to the earliest Crusades, as appealing or even faithful to Muhammad's example and directives as a warrior and conqueror during the latter part of Muhammad's life, as imperialist expansion into lands and kingdoms never before held or ruled by Muslims, as geographically and temporally boundless, and as readily endorsable by the Qur'an. "As traditionally understood, the Qur'an's tolerant verses are [chronologically] earlier and thus outweighed by the [chronologically later] more militant verses."¹⁶

Part four, "Sharpening the Moral Focus" shifts to difficulties New Atheists face in criticizing "religion" due to historic mass murders and oppressive statism by atheists and in the name of atheism, as well as the apparent inability of atheist philosophical presuppositions to explain or justify the moral outrage and values communicated by New Atheists.

Copan closes by cataloging ethical and aesthetic fruits blooming from the minds, hearts, and labor of people striving to embody Jesus' teachings by eradicating slavery, opposing infanticide, rescuing infants from exposure, eliminating Roman gladiatorial games, building hospitals and hospices, elevating the status of women and minorities, founding great universities, creating extraordinary art and literature, and contributing to modern science and human rights. There are multiple points to pursue in assessing Copan, but three are exceptionally salient:

First, Copan devotes attention predominantly to western Christian and secular sources in his appraisal, footnotes, and recommended reading. His labors could be leavened by additional engagement with rabbinic traditions, as well as Christian reflection outside America and Europe.

Second, atheist and other readers will object to Copan's characterizations of atheist bases for ethics. Reacting to angry atheists by quoting Malcolm Muggeridge is provocative, "I never, as it happens, came across a hospital or orphanage run by the Fabian Society or a Humanist leper colony," but Copan can also extend an olive branch by celebrating atheist exhortations to integrity, cooperation, and service.¹⁷ The Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard sponsors and mobilizes volunteers for social service in and beyond Boston, while The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science promotes, "Non-Believers Giving Aid – Disaster Relief Fund."¹⁸ Applauding these efforts as consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament would show a generous spirit diverging from some atheists' uncharitable scorn, even if Copan perceives atheist espousals of humanitarian ethics as philosophically incoherent.

Third, Copan may be overly pessimistic about Muslim conceptions of militant jihad. Is it impossible for Muslims to envisage the ferocious portions of the Qur'an and the life of Muhammad in ways that Christians and Jews interpret the Bible on the Canaanites – as bravado, poetic metaphor, unique, or restricted to only one (or limited) cultural-historical context(s)? In the early twenty-first century, neither the Roman Catholic

Church, nor Eastern Orthodoxy, nor any major protestant denomination or Jewish polity promotes Joshua's combat with the Canaanites—not to mention the Crusades—as model behavior. Perhaps current and future Muslims can and will articulate, circulate, and broadly embrace equivalent interpretations of the violent passages in the Qur'an, even if they have not historically or pervasively yet done so.¹⁹

Although Copan will not convince every interlocutor, he rigorously rebuts New Atheist and other aspersers of the Old Testament and the character of God therein. New Atheist and other disapproving hermeneutics are “weighed in the scales and found wanting” (Daniel 5:27, NRSV). Copan moves past negation to construct compelling cases for carefully nuanced ethics and integrity endorsed and described in Hebrew Scripture and by extension the New Testament. *Is God a Moral Monster?* invites vigorous conversation. Copan is detailed enough for scholars and ministers, yet accessible and stimulating enough for university courses and laypeople.

Notes:

¹ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

² Copan, 10, 209-222.

³ Copan, 11.

⁴ Copan, 15.

⁵ Copan, 35.

⁶ Copan, 58.

⁷ Copan, 59.

⁸ Copan, 59.

⁹ Copan, 67.

¹⁰ Copan, 70-86.

¹¹ Copan, 170.

¹² Copan, 170-171.

¹³ Copan, 177.

¹⁴ Copan, 199.

¹⁵ Copan, 205-206.

¹⁶ Copan, 206.

¹⁷ Copan, 212.

¹⁸ Cf. Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard, “Latest News: Help Us Package 9,110 Meals and Be Better Together,” Humanism at Harvard and Beyond, http://harvardhumanist.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=3&Itemid=38; Non-Believers Giving Aid – Disaster Relief, <http://givingaid.richarddawkins.net/>, both accessed September 5, 2011.

¹⁹ Cf. Efforts on The Official Website of A Common Word, <http://www.acommonword.com/>, accessed September 5, 2011; Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, “Shari'a and Basic Human Rights Concerns,” in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*,

ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, *The Second Message of Islam*, trans. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).