

T. King—

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

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**Week 1**

**Ch.1 Who Are the New Atheists?**

What have you read on the New Atheists? What are your impressions of them? \_\_\_\_\_

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Have you met people who have been influenced by their writings?

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From what you know of the New Atheists, do any of this chapter's comments about them ring true in your estimation?

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While exploring the internet, have you seen any other critiques about the New Atheists?

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Discuss Rodney Stark's comment about "angry and remarkably nasty atheists. What advice would you give about engaging in discussion with an "angry atheist"? Look at James 1:19; 1 Peter 3:15; Titus 2:10.

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What do you think of Michael Novak's claim that the New Atheists write with a certain defensiveness and desperation? In what ways is this so?

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**Ch. 2 The New Atheists and the Old Testament God**

After reading this chapter, what do you find are the more challenging issues mentioned by the New Atheists?

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In your conversations with other Christians or non-Christians, what Old Testament ethical questions tend to come up?

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Do you think that certain Old Testament texts are not as problematic as some people claim? Do you have any insights that might help put these texts into proper perspective?

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How do you respond to the challenge, "The God of the Old Testament is a lot nastier than the God of the New Testament?"

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What do you think of Dawkins's claim that "religion" is "the root of all evil"?

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Does Dawkins have a point about the "ubiquitous weirdness of the Bible"? Is this a fair statement?

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**Week 2**

**Ch. 3 Great Appetite for Praise and Sacrifices? Divine Arrogance or Humility?**

What is pride? What is humility?

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In the past, what have your impressions been about divine pride? Did you take for granted that God was proud (or something like it)? Had you ever thought of God being humble? What do you think of the claim that God is humble?

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What is the point of God's act of making human beings in his image?

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What do you think of the New Atheists' claim that belief in God has its source in biology (being "wired" by evolution to believe to enhance survival)? Is this a big threat to the truth of the Christian faith? Why or why not?

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How is humility different in God as opposed to human beings?

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What is the point of worship? Of praise?

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In what ways does God show himself to be humble?

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**Week 3**

**Ch. 4 Monumental Rage and Kinglike Jealousy? Understanding the Covenant-Making God**

Describe the bad kind of jealousy and the good kind of jealousy. Why is divine jealousy so deeply misunderstood?

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How does the analogy of marriage help us better understand divine jealousy? What impressions do you get from the biblical language that portrays God's "marriage" to his people?

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Why is idolatry both seductive and dangerous?

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What do you think of the concept of "divine vulnerability"? Discuss what this means—and what it doesn't mean.

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When is anger appropriate? Discuss the point that anger is often the first indication that we care.

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Why is it helpful to think of jealousy as protective?

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**Week 4**

**Ch. 5 Child Abuse and Bullying? God's Ways and the Binding of Isaac**

Has anyone you know ever raised concerns over this passage in Genesis 22? How did the discussion go?

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Does the critic have a point on the moral problems raised by this narrative? In what way?

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What do you think of the Abraham vs. Moses comparison to illustrate faith vs. the lack thereof? How is Abraham's faith in relation to the law understood by Paul in Romans 4? In what way is this comparison about faith helpful in understanding Genesis 22?

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How does the context of Abraham's call and his experience with his son Ishmael prepare Abraham for God's command in Genesis 22?

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As you look more closely at the text of Genesis 22, what stands out to you as you grapple with the command of God to Abraham?

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Review the quotations by Elie Wiesel and Jürgen Moltmann and discuss their significance.

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How does the New Testament shed light on God's command to Abraham? In what ways does the New Testament bring helpful clarity to some of the moral questions raised by Genesis 22?

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What is problematic with the charge that Jesus's death on the cross was an instance of "divine child abuse"?

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**Week 5**

**Ch. 6 God's Timeless Wisdom? Incremental Steps for Hardened Hearts**

Discuss C. S. Lewis's mention of "chronological snobbery." Why is this relevant for a discussion on "strange" Old Testament passages?

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What do we mean by the law of Moses being inferior and provisional? How does this help us understand the Mosaic law's role in our thinking today?

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What ideals does God establish in Genesis 1–2 (at creation) that serve as a reference point as we work through Old Testament ethical questions?

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Is it useful to think of Israel's laws as realistic, "incremental" steps toward the ideal? Is this a serious problem? Why or why not?

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How does Matthew 19:8 (the law and hardened human hearts) give insight regarding the less-than-ideal legislation in the law of Moses?

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What do you think of the discussion regarding the redemptive movement across the sweep of Scripture?

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Israel's history called for different courses of action/living in light of the unfolding context. How do we avoid the problem of relativism as applied to the Old Testament? Why is it right to avoid the thinking that something was true or right for Israel back then (e.g., battling the Canaanites) but not so for Israel later on? How do we avoid charges of relativism?

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What do we mean by the is-ought problem? Why is it important to distinguish between is and ought as we read through the Old Testament?

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**Week 6**

**Ch. 7 The Bible's Ubiquitous Weirdness? Kosher Foods, Kooky Laws? Part I**

What is the significance of the triangle image of God-people-land?

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Why was the grace-gratitude ideal supposed to be central to Israel's existence? How was this to be lived out in her everyday life?

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Contrast the church-state issue for Christians today and ancient Israel in the Old Testament. Why should we keep this difference in mind? What are the dangers if we don't?

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Are certain Islamic states really theocracies? What is the biblical perspective on this?

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What does holiness mean? What is the relationship of God's holiness to Israel's?

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Why did Israel have so many holiness laws? Why all the food, clothing, and planting regulations?

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Summarize what is meant by clean and unclean in the law of Moses. What is the significance of these categories?

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What is the relationship of clean and unclean animals to the spheres they inhabit? What message was God sending to Israel?"

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**Ch. 8 The Bible's Ubiquitous Weirdness? Kosher Foods, Kooky Laws? Part II**

Why are (1) hygiene and (2) false Canaanite religion insufficient contexts to account for Israel's kosher laws?

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What is meant by the "angles" of creation as well as fall, death, and abnormality? In what ways do these help us better understand Israel's food laws?

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What is the connection between the unblemished priest and the unblemished animal (from Lev. 21 and 22)? How does this comparison give insight into God's own expectations for his people Israel?

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Why do various bodily discharges create conditions of uncleanness? Does this at all reflect Israel's symbolic separation from Canaanite religion? In what way(s)?

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What is meant by the holiness gap?

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**Week 7**

**Ch. 9 Barbarisms, Crude Laws, and Other Imaginary Crimes? Punishments and Other Harsh Realities in Perspective**

Besides the passages mentioned early in the chapter, what other passages in the Old Testament strike you as harsh or brutal?

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What are your impressions of the treatment of the Sabbath-breaker and the blasphemer?

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Discuss the significance of this passage: “By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored” (Lev. 10:3).

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Discuss the passage of the “glutton and drunkard” son (Deut. 21:18–21). What are some important considerations as we approach this harsh text?

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Why were mediums, sorcerers, and false prophets not permitted in Israel?

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What is significant about the punishments in Israel in contrast to those in other parts of the ancient Near East?

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How should we understand the “eye for an eye” passages in the Old Testament? Is this as terrible as it appears to some readers? Again, how do Israel’s punishments compare to other ancient Near Eastern legislation?

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What is your response to Walter Kaiser’s position (pp. 95–96) on allowing most capital crimes to be commuted to “ransom” payments?

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Was infant sacrifice divinely permitted in ancient Israel? What about the examples of Mesha and Jephthah?

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Was unborn human life valued in ancient Israel? Give reasons for your answer.

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**Week 8**

**Misogynistic? Women in Israel**

In what ways does the Old Testament appear misogynistic (woman hating)? Does Israel's patriarchal society prove this point? Why or why not?

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How does the Old Testament reveal the fundamental equality of male and female?

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How does Old Testament legislation actually reveal protective and caring concern for females?

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What are your impressions about the trial of jealousy in Numbers 5? Compare this with the ancient Near East's river ordeal. What is the point of Numbers 5? Is it anti-woman?

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Why was a woman considered impure longer after having given birth to a girl as opposed to a boy?

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Describe what takes place in a levirate marriage. Was this an anti-woman practice?

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Does “your neighbor’s wife” in Exodus 20 indicate that a wife was the mere property of her husband in Israel?

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Was it sexist to prohibit women from Israel’s priesthood? Why is it useful to compare Israel’s religious practices to Canaanite practices in light of this question?

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**Week 9**

**Chapter 11 Bride-Price? Polygamy, Concubinage, and Other Such Questions**

Describe the practice of concubinage/polygamy in the ancient Near East and in Israel. What nuances and distinctions should be kept in mind?

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Does the Bible promote polygamy? Why is Leviticus 18:18 an important text to consider?

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Discuss the following texts, which allegedly support polygamy as legitimate: Exodus 21:7–11; 2 Samuel 12:8; Deuteronomy 21:15–17. Why are they inadequate supports for a pro-polygamy position?

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What is bride-price? Was this practice demeaning to women in Israel?

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Does the Old Testament treat rape lightly? Discuss Deuteronomy 22:23–29 and the three distinct situations to consider.

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Were women taken in warfare to be treated as sex objects? Did they have any protections? Discuss Deuteronomy 21:10–14 and 20:13–14.

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Discuss the “immodest lady wrestler” passage of Deuteronomy 25:11–12. Does the suggested interpretation make sense?

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**Week 10**

**Ch 12 Warrant for Trafficking in Humans as Farm Equipment? Part I**

What was the status of (chattel) slaves in the antebellum South? How does this compare to servanthood in ancient Israel? Why is it unfair to lump together these two different historical scenarios?

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Describe Israel's debt-servanthood system. What features of this system are important to keep in mind in light of the critics' challenges?

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Was it a huge and difficult step to move from indentured service in Israel to acquiring freedom?

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What specific key texts should have been given more consideration in the proslavery appeals to the Bible in the antebellum South?

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Why is Deuteronomy 15:1–18 such an important text?

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In what ways did Israelite servants (slaves) have unprecedented rights in the ancient Near East?

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Why is it significant that kings like David and Ahab were called to account for their actions by prophets?

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Read Genesis 1:26–27 and Job 31:13–15. What is the importance of these texts in relation to the slavery question?

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**Week 11**

**Ch 13 Warrant for Trafficking in Humans as Farm Equipment? Part II**

Read the challenging texts referenced in this chapter: Exodus 21:2–6; Leviticus 19:20–21; and 25:42–46. Which of these difficult passages stood out to you? Had you been aware of them before reading this book? Can you think of any others?

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Read through the explanation of Exodus 21:2–6. How does this compare to your impressions when you first read this text without the book’s explanation?

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What are your thoughts on the engaged servant girl passage (Lev. 19:20–21)? While not ideal, how does this situation compare to parallel scenarios in the ancient Near East?

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The passage from Leviticus 25:42–46 is perhaps the most jarring of the slave texts we’ve considered. What are some of the “important background considerations as we approach this text?

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Go back to Deuteronomy 15:1–18. How does this text reveal some of the dynamics in the unfolding/developing Mosaic law? How does the incident involving the daughters of Zelophehad illustrate this (Num. 27)?

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How does the discussion of illegal immigration today shed light on the discussion of foreigners in Israel?

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**Week 12**

**Ch 14 Warrant for Trafficking in Humans as Farm Equipment? Part III**

What is the point of comparing Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to the servanthood/slavery question in the law of Moses?

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In the New Testament, what are the implications of Galatians 3:28 for slavery? For sexism? For racism?

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How was slavery in Rome during New Testament times different from the Old Testament picture of servanthood in Israel?

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How does the New Testament affirm the dignity and equality of slaves with their masters? What other interesting aspects of this topic emerge in the New Testament?

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What does it mean that the New Testament writers addressed deeper heart issues underlying slavery, just as Jesus did about money?

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Was the Onesimus-Philemon situation a throwback to Hammurabi's Code? Why or why not?

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Some charge that God's ultimate goal is to enslave all human beings, thus demeaning them and stripping them of their dignity. What is the problem with this picture?

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**Week 13**

**Ch 15 Indiscriminate Massacre and Ethnic Cleansing? The Killing of the Canaanites Part I**

This book claims that the “Canaanite question” is the most difficult ethical challenge in the Old Testament. Do you agree? Why or why not?

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Some people claim that the Canaanites were the most wicked people ever or the most wicked in the ancient Near East. Does the believer have to insist on this?

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Was God just picking on the Canaanites by commanding this corporate capital punishment? What does the rest of Scripture tell us about matters of judgment, both outside and within Israel?

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Some people wonder who determines the moral point of no return for the Canaanites. How do you respond?

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Was Israel’s act of killing the Canaanites the same thing as General Lin of a Chinese kingdom three thousand years ago wiping out a certain people group?

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The Israelites took the ark of the covenant into battle against the Philistines (1 Sam. 4) without divine approval. How is this a helpful illustration for our discussion on Israelite war?

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Shouldn't the Canaanites have known better so that they could turn from their ways?

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Why is the loaded term ethnic cleansing misleading and inaccurate?

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Is it fair to call the Israelites xenophobic? How was Israel's experience in Egypt supposed to shape their attitudes toward outsiders?

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Should God have been more efficient in destroying the Canaanites? Why not ensure that no Canaanites remained?

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What is the connection between Israel's destroying Canaan's idols and spiritual/cosmic warfare?

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**Week 14**

**Ch 16 Indiscriminate Massacre and Ethnic Cleansing? The Killing of the Canaanites Part II**

Why is it important to understand that Israel's warfare with the Canaanites was a historically unique undertaking commanded by God

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What did Israel's taking of Canaan involve? Why is the conquest model inadequate by itself?

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What are your impressions about the ancient Near Eastern bravado or exaggeration used in Joshua? Does this help shed light on Israel's conquest and the "utter destruction" of the Canaanites?

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Who were the Amalekites, and how do they fit into the discussion of Yahweh wars?

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Must we conclude that noncombatants were directly targeted by Israel's army? Does mention of women and children" require this interpretation?

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What does the evidence show regarding Canaanite cities during the time of Joshua and Judges? What function did they serve? How is this helpful as we think through the Canaanite problem?

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Was the “ban” against Canaanite cities absolute and nonnegotiable?

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How do Israel’s warfare methods compare with other nations in the ancient Near East?

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What is the significance of the predominant “driving out” language used in the Pentateuch?

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How does archaeology support a more gradual infiltration of Israel into Canaan rather than a sudden, dramatic conquest?

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**Week 15**

**Ch 17 Indiscriminate Massacre and Ethnic Cleansing? The Killing of the Canaanites Part III**

What's the problem with the claim that fighting against the Canaanites would inevitably set a terrible war-making precedent for later generations of Israelites?

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How does God's concern for redeeming Canaanites and other enemies of Israel strike you? How does that help put the Canaanite warfare issue into clearer perspective?

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Compare the approaches to the Canaanite question in the previous chapter and this one. What is your view regarding these alternatives? What are the merits of each position?

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How do you respond to the question of Israelite soldiers being psychologically damaged by killing noncombatants? What if "God calls us to endure what is extremely difficult or psychologically taxing? Would this necessarily be inappropriate or unjust? Does the analogy of Frodo and the ring offer any insight?

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Discuss this statement: If the Israelites hadn't done serious damage to the Canaanite religious infrastructure, then the result would have been incalculable damage to Israel's integrity and thus to God's entire plan to redeem humanity.

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Compare God's command to Abraham regarding Isaac to his command to Israel regarding the Canaanites. How is this comparison useful?

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What do you think of Miroslav Volf's comments on God's wrath? Does this help shed light on various Old Testament scenarios, including the Canaanite question?

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Why do we need to recover the concept of an untamable God?

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How may the story of Job give insight into the Canaanite issue?

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How do the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ provide us with resources for thinking through the Canaanite problem?

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**Week 16**

**Ch 18 The Root of All Evil? Does Religion Cause Violence?**

What do you think of the claim that monotheism leads to violence? Are exclusivistic truth claims the problem? Why are Enlightenment values not the solution?

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Why is the term religion in this discussion often being used unfairly?

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What do you think about the claim that sociological, historical, ethnic, or economic factors commonly lurk behind religious hostilities? Can you give some examples?

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Regarding Regina Schwartz's critique, why is Cain not a good example of monotheistic exclusion? What about Esau?

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Must all gifts from God (e.g., intelligence, artistic abilities) be distributed equally to show that God is truly just? Why or why not?

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Why is absolute hospitality a picture of injustice? What do we mean by speaking of the right of self-exclusion?

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The Crusades are commonly mentioned as a critique of the Christian faith. How do you respond to this? How do the Crusades compare to Islamic jihad?

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Why are Old Testament Yahweh wars so unlike Islamic jihad?

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**Week 17**

**Ch 19 Morality without a Lawgiving God? The Divine Foundation of Goodness**

Have you ever discussed the topic of morality with an atheist or skeptic? How have the conversations gone?

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What is the glaring inconsistency in Richard Dawkins's claim that God is a "moral monster"?

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Why is it important to distinguish between "knowing" and "being" when it comes to morality? Why is it so difficult to account for human dignity and worth if God doesn't exist?

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Atheists commonly claim that they are just as good as any religious believer. However, what are some moral obligations that atheists don't carry out?

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How do you respond to the claim that evolution explains morality? What is missing in purely naturalistic accounts of morality?

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How does the existence of a good God who makes human beings in his image offer a more likely context for objective moral values?

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**Week 18**

**Ch 20 We Have Moved beyond This God (Haven't We?): Jesus as the Fulfiller of the Old Testament**

When Christopher Hitchens says that “religion poisons everything,” what does he mean? What is the problem with his claim?

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Contrary to the New Atheists, what contributions have Jews made to civilization? This book lists some of them. Can you think of others?

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What have been some of the contributions Christians have made to the world? What Christ-inspired effects have brought light, help, and hope to the world? Can you think of any other contributions not mentioned in the book?

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Look at Jürgen Habermas’s quotation on the influence of the Christian faith. What do you think of it, and why is this important in light of the New Atheists’ critique?

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How does the coming of Jesus bring clarity to the Old Testament and some of its challenges?

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Overall, what have been some benefits you’ve taken away from reading and discussing this book? What have you learned about the character and activity of God across the two testaments? How have you been stretched and even strengthened in your faith?

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