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Who Are the New Atheists?

In February 2007, I was one of several plenary speakers at the Greer-Heard Forum, an annual conference held in New Orleans. This year the topic was “The Future of Atheism.”¹ One featured speaker on the orthodox Christian side was British theologian Alister McGrath. The other far-from-orthodox speaker was Daniel Dennett, the naturalistic evolutionist and philosopher of mind from Tufts University.

This was the first opportunity I had to meet one of the “New Atheists.” My wife and I enjoyed chatting with Dan at meals, and, as his room was right across the hall from ours, we interacted during our comings and goings over the weekend. Dan is a witty, engaging conversationalist with a pleasant life-of-the-party demeanor. His Santa-like face and beard only add to the conviviality.

As a “New Atheist,” Dan is one of several God-deniers writing bestsellers these days. Some have called him one of the “four horsemen”—along with Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens—of the Neo-atheistic apocalypse. What’s so *new* about this New Atheism? Hasn’t atheism been around from ancient times? Yes. For example, the pleasure-promoting Epicurus (341–270 BC) and his later admirer Lucretius (94–54 BC) were materialists; that is, they believed that matter is all there is. If deities exist, they’re irrelevant. And when you die, that’s it—over and out.

In more recent history, we’ve had “newer” atheists across the modern and contemporary philosophical landscape—from Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Bertrand Russell to Thomas Nagel, John Searle, Keith Parsons, Graham Oppy, and William Rowe. Atheism is certainly alive and kicking. As we’ll see, the New Atheists add, shall we say, “spice” to the God discussion.

The New Face of Atheism

In the eyes of many, the Christian faith has an image problem. Many unchurched persons have been turned off to “Christianity”—though not necessarily to Jesus. They don’t like politicized religion in America, along with what they see as ample Christian arrogance, hypocrisy, judgmentalism, and disconnectedness from the real world.² The perceptions of church outsiders are obviously not totally accurate, but they can often provide an illuminating corrective to help professing Christians to properly align themselves with Jesus their Master.

Due in large part to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the Twin Towers, the New Atheists have capitalized on evil done “in the name of religion” to tar all things religious with the same brush. (Of course “religion” is notoriously difficult to define, but the New Atheists aren’t into making nuanced distinctions here.) Neo-atheists are riding the crest of this new wave, capitalizing on the West’s increasingly “post-Christian” status. This current tide of emboldened opposition to the Christian faith lumps Christianity into the same category as radical

Islam. Neo-atheists are the new public, popular face of atheism—a topic no longer seemingly limited to ivory tower academics.

Not that the New Atheists have convinced everyone. According to the eminent sociologist Rodney Stark,³ the New Atheists are making a big media splash and have had several bestsellers to their credit. Many have interpreted this as a sign that multitudes of Americans are ready to renounce God publicly. But for most people, saying they have no religion just means they have no church—not that they're irreligious. The number of atheists in America in recent history has remained fairly consistent. According to Gallup polls, 4 percent of Americans were atheists back in 2007—the same percentage as in 1944! Rumors of God's death have been greatly exaggerated. And when we look at the non-Western world, people are becoming Christians in record numbers. The Christian faith is the fastest-growing movement around, often accompanied by signs and wonders, as Penn State historian Philip Jenkins has ably documented.⁴

Whether from atheists or theists, we are seeing something of an all-around consensus about the Neo-atheists' arguments. *First, for all their emphasis on cool-headed, scientific rationality, they express themselves not just passionately but angrily.* Rodney Stark describes them as “angry and remarkably nasty atheists.” Christian thinker Michael Novak, author of the thought-provoking book *No One Sees God*, comments about the Neo-atheists' writings that there's “an odd defensiveness about all these books—as though they were a sign not of victory but of desperation.”⁵

Dennett tends to be more measured in his criticism of religion. He thinks the jury's still out on whether religion's benefits outweigh its deficits—unlike other New Atheists, who insist that religion without exception is downright *dangerous*. But even so, he doesn't always fairly engage the opposition by his selective quoting.⁶ And he's bestowed the name “brights” on the atheistically minded—with a not-so-flattering implication for theists!

The New Atheists are right to point out that manifestations of ignorance, immorality, and hypocrisy characterize professing religious believers of all stripes. In Matthew 7:15–23, Jesus himself warned about morally bankrupt false prophets; they wear sheep's clothing to cover their wolflike interior. They do outwardly pious acts but are ultimately judged to be “evildoers” (NIV). This is tragic, though anticipated by Jesus and the lot of New Testament authors. And, of course, the discerning person will recognize that Jesus shouldn't be blamed because of the abuses of his professed followers.

Second, the Neo-atheists' arguments against God's existence are surprisingly flimsy, often resembling the simplistic village atheist far more than the credentialed academician. The Neo-atheists are often profoundly ignorant of what they criticize, and they typically receive the greatest laughs and cheers from the philosophically and theologically challenged. True, they effectively utilize a combination of emotion and verbal rhetoric, but they aren't known for logically carrying thoughts through from beginning to end. Their arguments against God's existence aren't intellectually rigorous—although they want to give that impression. Yes, they'll raise some important questions concerning, for example, the problem of evil, but again, their arguments are a collage of rhetorical barbs that don't really form a coherent argument. I've observed that while these men do have expertise in certain fields (biology and evolutionary theory in the case of Dawkins and Dennett), they turn out to be fairly disappointing when arguing against God's existence or Christian doctrine. And a quick check of

Dawkins's documentation reveals a lot more time spent on Google than at Oxford University's Bodleian Library.⁷

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges is the author of *I Don't Believe in Atheists* and certainly no friend of conservative Christians. He chastises Sam Harris for his "facile attack on a form of religious belief we all hate" and "his childish simplicity and ignorance of world affairs." The Christian can rightly join Hedges and the New Atheists' disgust at "the chauvinism, intolerance, anti-intellectualism and self-righteousness of religious fundamentalists" without buying into their arguments.⁸ Rodney Stark puts it this way: "To expect to learn anything about important theological problems from Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett is like expecting to learn about medieval history from someone who had only read *Robin Hood*."⁹

Yes, it's easy to attack a caricature with emotionalism and simplistic slogans. So with the New Atheists "going village" on us, this makes it hard to have a decent conversation. What has amazed me is that so many have been intellectually swindled by such fallacious argumentation and bluster rhetoric.

Don't just take it from me. The atheist philosopher of science Michael Ruse says that Dawkins's arguments are so bad that he's *embarrassed* to call himself an atheist.¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, an English literature and cultural theory professor, severely criticizes "Ditchkins"—his composite name for Dawkins and Hitchens. He considers them to be both out of their depth and misrepresenters of the Christian faith: "they invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince. The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be."¹¹

In a book I coedited with fellow philosopher William Lane Craig, he wrote an essay titled "Dawkins's Delusion," which responds to Dawkins's book *The God Delusion*. Craig does his best to piece together Dawkins's argument against God's existence, which is really "embarrassingly weak." At the end of his essay, Craig writes:

Several years ago my atheist colleague Quentin Smith unceremoniously crowned Stephen Hawking's argument against God in *A Brief History of Time* as "the worst atheistic argument in the history of Western thought."¹² With the advent of *The God Delusion* the time has come, I think, to relieve Hawking of this weighty crown and to recognize Richard Dawkins' accession to the throne.¹³

Third, the New Atheists aren't willing to own up to atrocities committed in the name of atheism by Stalin, Pol Pot, or Mao Zedong, yet they expect Christians to own up to all barbarous acts performed in Jesus's name. In one debate, Dennett refused to connect Stalin's brutality and inhumanity with his hard-core atheism. In fact, he claimed that Stalin was a kind of "religious" figure!¹⁴ In September 2009, I attended a debate between Hitchens and Dinesh D'Souza in Orlando. Hitchens refused to admit that Stalin killed "in the name of atheism." Somehow Stalin, who had once attended a Russian Orthodox seminary but later came to convincingly repudiate Christianity, was still "religious" after all. Yet Hitchens insisted that a religious residue still stayed with him. So atheism wasn't the culprit. Yet in another debate, Hitchens was pressed to make the seemingly rare confession: "It has to be said that some of my non-believing forbears seized the opportunity to behave the same way [as immoral religious persons], sure."¹⁵

I think the reason it's difficult, if not impossible, for these New Atheists to acknowledge immorality in the name of atheism is because it would take much wind out of their sails when criticizing religion. If we'd stop to ask, "Would Jesus approve of the Inquisition or persecuting Jews?" the question answers itself. As a counterillustration, what about serial murderer and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer? Dahmer reasoned, "If it all happens naturalistically, what's the need for a God? Can't I set my own rules? Who owns me? I own myself."¹⁶ He wondered, if there's no God and we all just came "from the slime," then "what's the point of trying to modify your behavior to keep it within acceptable ranges?"¹⁷

The reverse side of the coin is New Atheists' refusal (or great reluctance) to acknowledge the profound, well-documented positive influence of Christian faith in the world. This list of contributions includes preserving literature, advancing education, laying the foundations of modern science, cultivating art and music, promoting human rights and providing better working conditions for persons, and overthrowing slavery. These contributions are acknowledged by atheists and theists alike. For the New Atheists, religion poisons everything, and atheism poisons nothing!

We'll come back to this later. But for now I'm just registering my complaint.

One Unaddressed Area

Despite the strong intellectual response to New Atheism, one area left unaddressed is that of Old Testament ethics. In some ways, this topic is probably most deserving of our attention and clarification. The New Atheists commonly raise questions about strange and harsh Old Testament laws, a God of jealousy and anger, slavery, and the killing of the Canaanites—and that's just the beginning of the list. Not only this, but they're usually just as simplistic and uninformed here as in their general attacks on religion.

As I've done some writing in this area, I wanted to use the New Atheists' critiques as a springboard to clarify and iron out misunderstandings and misrepresentations. It's not an easy area to cover, as the ancient Near East is a world that often seems so bizarre to us. As we explore some of the main criticisms of Old Testament ethics (we can't cover them all here), hopefully we'll gain a new appreciation for what is going on in the Old Testament, especially when we compare it to other ancient Near East cultures.

Further Reading

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2

The New Atheists and the Old Testament God

As I write this book, the Neo-atheists are not quite as cutting edge as they once were. They're so 2006! Yet they dig up the dirt on many perennial Old Testament ethical challenges, and Bible believers shouldn't shove them under their holy rugs. As people of the Book, Christians should honestly reflect on such matters. Unfortunately, most pastors and Christian leaders are reluctant to tackle such subjects, and the results are fairly predictable. When uninformed Christians are challenged about these texts, they may be rattled in their faith.

The ancient heretic Marcion rejected the seemingly harsh Creator and God of the Israelites for a New Testament God of love—a heavenly Father. Likewise, the New Atheists aren't too impressed with Yahweh—one of the Hebrew names for God in the Old Testament.¹ Christopher Hitchens's book title expresses it: *God Is Not Great*. This is in contrast to the Muslim's call, *Allahu akbar*, “God is great(er).” Richard Dawkins calls God a “moral monster.” As we read the New Atheists, we can compile quite a catalog of alleged offenses. Let's start with Dawkins and work our way down the list.

Dawkins deems God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (see Gen. 22) to be “disgraceful” and tantamount to “child abuse and bullying.” Moreover, this God breaks into a “monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirted with a rival god,” resembling “nothing so much as sexual jealousy of the worst kind.” Add to this the killing of the Canaanites—an “ethnic cleansing” in which “bloodthirsty massacres” were carried out with “xenophobic relish.” Joshua's destruction of Jericho is “morally indistinguishable from Hitler's invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein's massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs.” This is just one example of why religion is, as Dawkins's 2006 BBC documentary phrases it, “the root of all evil.”²

To make matters worse, Dawkins points out the “ubiquitous weirdness of the Bible.” Many biblical characters engaged in morally scummy acts. Here's a sampling:

- A drunken Lot was seduced by his recently widowed daughters, who eventually bore his children (Gen. 19:31–36).
- Abraham gave a repeat performance of lying about his wife (Gen. 12:18–19; 20:1–13).
- Jephthah made a foolish vow that resulted in his daughter being sacrificed as a burnt offering (Judg. 11).
- David power-raped Bathsheba and engaged in murderous treachery toward her husband, Uriah—one of David's loyal “mighty men” (2 Sam. 11; 23:39).³

We can add more to the list. Dawkins's most notable description of Yahweh is this one:

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.⁴

Then there's Dan Dennett. He declares that the "Old Testament Jehovah" is simply a super-*man* who "could take sides in battles, and be both jealous and wrathful." He happens to be more forgiving and loving in the New Testament. Dennett adds, "Part of what makes Jehovah such a fascinating participant in stories of the Old Testament is His kinglike jealousy and pride, and His great appetite for praise and sacrifices. But we have moved beyond this God (haven't we?)." He thanks "heaven" that those thinking blasphemy or adultery deserves capital punishment are a "dwindling minority."⁵

Christopher Hitchens (who at the time of this writing is grappling with esophageal cancer and for whom many of us are praying) voices similar complaints. Chapter 7 of *God Is Not Great* is titled "Revelation: The Nightmare of the Old Testament," noting God's "unalterable laws." The forgotten Canaanites were "pitilessly driven out of their homes to make room for the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel." Moreover, the Old Testament contains "a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human animals." And the Ten Commandments are "proof that religion is manmade." For one thing, you don't need God to tell you that murder is wrong; this information is available to all humans.⁶

Sam Harris similarly chimes in. His *Letter to a Christian Nation* deliberately sets out to "demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms." If the Bible is true, then we should be stoning people to death for heresy, adultery, homosexuality, worshipping graven images, and "other imaginary crimes." In fact, putting to death idolaters in our midst (see Deut. 13:6–15) reflects "God's timeless wisdom."⁷

In *The End of Faith*, Harris, referring to Deuteronomy 13:6–11, insists that the consistent Bible believer should stone his son or daughter if she comes home from a yoga class a devotee of Krishna. Harris wryly quips that one of the Old Testament's "barbarisms"—stoning children for heresy—"has fallen out of fashion in our country."⁸

Harris reminds Bible-believers that once we recognize that slaves are human beings who are equally capable of suffering and happiness, we'll understand that it is "patently evil to own them and treat them like farm equipment."

A few pages later, Harris claims we can be good without God. We do not need God or a Bible to tell us what's right and what's wrong. We can know objective moral truths without "the existence of a lawgiving God," and we can judge Hitler to be morally reprehensible "without reference to scripture."⁹ Harris calls this "the myth of secular moral chaos"—that morality will crumble if people don't have a Bible or if they happen not to believe in God.

We've accumulated quite a working list of charges coming from the New Atheists:

- Canaanite "genocide"
- the binding of Isaac

- a jealous, egocentric deity
- ethnocentrism/racism
- chattel slavery
- bride-price
- women as inferior to men
- harsh laws in Israel
- the Mosaic law as perfect and permanently binding for all nations
- the irrelevance of God for morality

I don't want to give the impression that all of these questions are easily solved. The noted Christian Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright has written a direct, honest exploration of certain Old Testament difficulties, especially the Canaanite question, in *The God I Don't Understand*.¹⁰ Will gaps in our understanding of these texts still exist? Will some of our questions remain unanswered? Yes and amen. But I believe that with patience, charity, and humility we can navigate these waters with greater skill, arriving at far more satisfactory answers than the New Atheists allow.

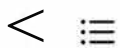
One big problem for *any* interpreter is this: we're dealing with an Old Testament text that is remote in both time and culture. In many cases, the New Atheists aren't all that patient in their attempts to understand a complex text, historical contexts, and the broader biblical canon. Yet this is what we need to do and what this book attempts to do at a popular level.

In each chapter, I'll be borrowing from the phrases of these Neo-atheists to frame the discussion. Hopefully, we can see these Old Testament ethical issues in their proper context. In doing so, we'll get a firmer grasp on what the Old Testament ethical issues really are and how we should assess them.

Further Reading

Novak, Michael. *No One Sees God*. New York: Doubleday, 2007.

Wright, Christopher J. H. *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.



3

Great Appetite for Praise and Sacrifices?

Divine Arrogance or Humility?

Humility is a misunderstood virtue. The country singer Mac Davis boldly sang that it was hard to be humble since he was perfect in every way. I grew up hearing lines such as "Humble-and proud of it!" or "Have you read my book, *Humility and How I Attained It?*" We immediately detect something wrong with this picture. Yet the New Atheists wonder how God—who is so, well, God-centered—can't also be accused of narcissism and vanity. According to Richard Dawkins, God is obsessed with "his own superiority over rival gods."¹ The God of the Bible seems to seek attention and crave praise—an altogether unflattering characteristic. He's out to "make a name for Himself" (2 Sam. 7:23). He delivers his people from Egypt "for the sake of His name" (Ps. 106:8).

So does God have an unhealthy self-preoccupation? Do our atheist friends have a point? Not on this one. On closer inspection, God turns out to be a humble, self-giving, other-centered Being.

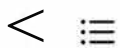
Defining Our Terms

On one occasion Winston Churchill described a particular person this way: "He's a humble man—and for good reason!" Apparently that man had his limitations and needed to keep them in mind.

Before approaching most topics, it's good to clear the decks and first define our terms. What do we *really* mean by "pride" and "humility"? Pride, we know, is an inflated view of ourselves—a false advertising campaign promoting ourselves because we suspect that others won't accept who we really are.² Pride is actually a lie about our own identity or achievements. To be proud is to live in a world propped up with falsehoods about ourselves, taking credit where credit isn't due.

Yes, in a sense, we can "take pride" or be gratified in our work; Paul did so as an apostle (2 Cor. 10:17). Paul was proud of early Christians' progress in their faith and in their proper use of God-given abilities (2 Cor. 7:14; 9:3-4). In such cases, Paul recognized that God is the great Enabler. The God-dependent believer can "boast in the Lord" (2 Cor. 10:17) and in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14). This is no "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" type of self-reliance; that would be a failure or refusal to acknowledge our proper place before God in light of his grace.

What then is humility? This involves having a realistic assessment of ourselves—our weaknesses *and* strengths. Plagiarism (a big problem in the academic world these days) is an attempt to take credit for someone else's work. Plagiarizers create an impression that's out of touch with reality. But think about this: for Yo-Yo Ma to claim that he "really can't play the cello all that well" or for Landon Donovan to say he "can't really play soccer" would be equally out of touch with reality—a *false* humility. (What's more, these kinds of statements are usually a backdoor attempt to get



attention!) True humility doesn't deny abilities but rather acknowledges God as the source of these gifts, for which we can't take credit. What do we have that we didn't receive (I Cor. 4:7)? To be humble is to know our proper place before God—with all of our strengths and weaknesses.

Well, then, *is* God proud? No, he has a realistic view of himself, not a false or exaggerated one. God, by definition, is the greatest conceivable being, which makes him worthy of worship. In fact, our word *worship* is a kind of contraction of the Old English word *weorthscipe*—or "worth-ship." So if an all-powerful but despicably evil being demanded our worship, we shouldn't give it to him. He wouldn't be worthy of worship.

God doesn't take more credit than he deserves. For example, he doesn't claim to make the choices that morally responsible humans must make, nor does he take credit for being the author of evil in the name of "sovereignty" (which some Christians tend to assign to him when they praise God *for* evil things). No, God doesn't "think more highly of himself than he ought to think" (Rom. 12:3). Rather, he thinks quite accurately about himself.

God's Image—Divine Pride or Gracious Gift?

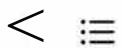
Daniel Dennett's charge that God is just a *super-man* who has an appetite for praise seems to be justified by the idea that God makes humans in his image (Gen. 1:26-27). God is like a vain toy maker creating dolls that look just like him. Isn't God's act of creating humans in his image just another sign of his vanity?

Actually, to be made in God's image and to receive salvation (entrance into God's family) are expressions of God's kindness, not divine arrogance. When God created human beings, he uniquely equipped them for two roles, as the early chapters of Genesis suggest. The first is our *kingly* role: God endowed us to share in ruling the creation with him. The second is our *priestly* role of relating to ("walking with") God and orienting our lives around him. Being made in God's image as priest-kings brings with it the ability to relate to God, to think rationally, to make moral decisions, to express creativity, and (with God) to care for and wisely harness creation. This is privilege, not bondage!

Our being made in God's image is simply God's "spreading the wealth." God's rich goodness overflows to his creation, which lives, moves, and has its being in him. Though God created freely and without constraint, God is bursting with joy and love to share his goodness with his creatures. He allows us, his image-bearers, to share (in a very limited way) in his characteristics. God enables us to participate in the life of the divine community, the Trinity—a life that fills him with great joy and pleasure (see 2 Peter 1:4). God bestows on us the great compliment of endowing us with a privileged position and with important capacities—ones that reflect God's own wonderful nature.

The Biology of Religious Devotion?

The inventor Thomas Edison said that humans are "incurably religious." History certainly bears this out. But *why* have humans been so religiously inclined across the millennia and civilizations? Neo-atheists Dawkins and Dennett interpret the phenomenon this way: theology is biology. To Dawkins, God is a "delusion"; for Dennett, religious believers are under a kind of "spell" that



needs to be broken. Like computers, Dawkins says, we come equipped with a remarkable predisposition to do (and believe) what we're told. So young minds full of mush are susceptible to mental infections or viruses ("memes"). Charismatic preachers and other adults spew out their superstitious bilge, and later generations latch on to it and eventually create churches and religious schools. Even if there isn't a "God gene," humans have a certain religious urge—an apparent hard-wiring in the brain that draws us to supernatural myths.³

Some conclude, therefore, that God doesn't exist but is simply the product of predictable biological processes. One big problem with this statement: it is a whopping non sequitur. It just doesn't follow that if humans are somehow wired to be religious, God therefore doesn't exist. This is what's called "the genetic fallacy"—proving or disproving the truth of a view based on its origin. In this case, God's existence is a separate question from the source of religious beliefs. We need to sort out the *biology* of belief from the *rationality* of belief.

There's more to say here. We could turn the argument on its head: if God exists and has designed us to connect with him, then we're actually functioning properly when we're being directed toward belief in God. We can agree that natural/physical processes partly contribute to commitment to God. In that case, the basic argument of Dawkins and Dennett could actually support the idea that religious believers are functioning decently and in order.

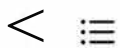
On top of this, we're also left wondering why people would think up gods and spirits in the first place. Why would humans *voluntarily* sacrifice their lives for some intangible realm? Maybe it's because the physical domain doesn't contain the source of coherence, order, morality, meaning, and guidance for life. Humans, though embodied, are moral, spiritual beings; they're able to rise above the physical and biological to reflect on it and on their condition. This can result in the search for a world-transcending God.⁴

Attempts by these New Atheists to explain away theology as a useful fiction or, worse, a harmful delusion fall short of telling us why the religious impulse is so deeply imbedded. If God exists, however, we have an excellent reason as to why religious fervor should exist.

Worship: Getting in Touch with Reality

During his "Christian phase," singer Bob Dylan came out with the song "Gotta Serve Somebody." "It may be the devil or it may be the Lord," he sang, "but you're gonna have to serve somebody."⁵ Jesus tells us that worship is directed to either God *or* a God-substitute of our making (that is, an idol). In the Sermon on the Mount, he asserts that we can't serve two masters at the same time; we can't love both God *and* wealth (Matt. 6:24). In Romans 6, Paul affirms that we'll either be slaves to obedience or to disobedience (v. 16).

As we've seen, we're naturally religious creatures. Ecclesiastes acknowledges that God has placed eternity in our hearts (3:11). We're designed to worship and serve. Now, if God truly exists, then worship turns out to be moral, spiritual creatures getting in touch with reality. Just as genuine humility is rooted in reality, so is worship. Why does God insist that we worship him? For the same reason that parents tell their young children to stay away from fire or speeding cars. God doesn't want humans to detach themselves from ultimate reality, which only ends up harming us.



God's calling for our worship isn't a manifestation of pride-of false, overinflated views of himself. The call to worship means inclusion in the life of God. Worship expresses an awareness of God's-and thus our-proper place in the order of things, and it also transforms us into what we were designed to be. In the end, God desires to be known as God, which is only appropriate and the ultimate good for creatures. On the other hand, for humans to desire universal, eternal fame would be reality-denying idolatry.⁶

Seeking Praise?

We get rather disgusted when a person is constantly fishing for compliments, don't we? Why then does God do this? Why all the praise seeking?

Actually, in the Bible, God isn't the one commanding us to praise him. Typically, fellow creatures are spontaneously calling on one another to do so-to recognize God's greatness and worth-ship. Praise naturally flows from-and completes-the creature's enjoyment of God. God is self-sufficient and content in and of himself. He doesn't need frail humans for some sort of ego boost. As Psalm 50: 12 reminds us: "If I [God] were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains."

C. S. Lewis had his own misconceptions about this notion of praise and wrote of the lesson he learned:

But the most obvious fact about praise-whether of God or anything-strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.... The world rings with praise-lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their game.... I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is appointed consummation.⁷

Lewis realized that praise stems from doing what one can't help doing-giving utterance to what we regard as supremely valuable: "It is good to sing praises to our God." Why? "For it is pleasant and praise is becoming" (Ps. 147:1).

Another related point: when we creatures *truly* show love for God, it's not because of a crass desire for rewards or to avoid punishment. The sheer enjoyment of God's presence-the greatest good of humans-and his approval of us are reward enough. Once again, Lewis has offered a delightful picture:

Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he marries a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it.... Those who have attained everlasting life in the vision of God know very well that it is no mere bribe, but the very consummation of their earthly discipleship.⁸

The Humble, Self-Giving God

Many Christians have the false impression that something resembling divine humility appears occasionally in the Bible-for example, in the incarnation of Christ-but that humility isn't an enduring divine quality. Upon closer inspection, God-yes, even in the Old Testament-is charac-

teristically humble. The "high and exalted One" dwells "with the contrite and lowly of spirit" (Isa. 57:15). Psalm 113:5-6 affirms a God who stoops to look upon us. In God's interaction with Israel, we see an other-centered, patient endurance despite Israel's rebellion, grumbling, and idolatry.

The New Testament only *expands on* this theme of divine humility; it doesn't *invent* it. There, God's humility is made more apparent in three ways.

First, God is triune. Three distinct divine persons share an eternal, unbreakable unity of one being. (As an analogy, think of the mythological three-headed dog Cerberus—three centers of awareness having a canine nature but in one dog.) God is inherently loving and self-giving within the relationships of the divine family, the Trinity. In this divine inter- (and inner-) connection of mutuality, openness, and reciprocity there is no individualistic competition among the family members but only joy, self-giving love, and transparency. Rather than being some isolated self or solitary ego, God is supremely relational in his self-giving, other-oriented nature.

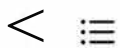
Second, God becomes human. Further evidence of divine humility is the incarnation of Christ. God becomes a Jew in the person of Jesus of Nazareth! Because humans are made in God's image, it's not a contradiction for God to become human; after all, what makes us human is derived from God's nature in the first place.

So the incarnate Christ describes himself as "gentle and humble in heart"—this in the very same context as his declaration of (1) uniquely knowing, relating to, and revealing the Father and (2) being the one who gives the weary rest for their souls (Matt. 11:27–29). Greatness and humility don't contradict each other. In fact, God's greatness is seen in his willingness to serve us: "I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27). Jesus comes not to be served but to "serve" and to "give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

Third, God takes our place on a cross. A Muslim friend, Abdul, once expressed his difficulties with God becoming a human and dying on the cross. "It's such a humiliation!" he exclaimed. For the Muslim, God is so utterly transcendent and removed from us. Yet Philippians 2 marvelously displays the depths to which God is willing to go for our salvation: God the Son humbles (empties) himself, becoming a slave (*doulos*) who dies fully naked, for all to see—in great shame and humiliation (vv. 6–8). Jesus's crucifixion is a picture of both humility and greatness. God's humiliation turns out to be his own mark of distinction and moment of glory! Jesus, who was faithfully living out Israel's story as God had intended it, was actually enduring the curse of exile and alienation so that God's new community could receive blessing.

John's Gospel refers to Jesus being "lifted up" on the cross (12:32; cf. 3:14–15; 8:28). This is both *literal* and *figurative*. Being lifted up is both the physical act of being raised up onto a cross and the figurative reference to exaltation and honor from God, including the drawing of the nations to salvation (John 12:32). The moment of Christ's humiliating death is precisely when he is "glorified" (John 12:23–24; 13:31–32). God's great moment of glory is in the experience of the greatest humiliation and shame—when he takes the form of a slave and suffers death on a cross for our sakes.

This is how low God is willing to go for our salvation! This act of divine service to humans is utterly unique in antiquity. No wonder the late German New Testament scholar Martin Hengel wrote, "The discrepancy between the shameful death of a Jewish state criminal and the confession



that depicts this executed man as the pre-existent divine figure who becomes man and humbles himself to a slave's death is, as far as I can see, without analogy in the ancient world."⁹

Once a Muslim expressed to me his disbelief and even scorn at the idea of Christians wearing crosses: "How can Christians wear with pride the instrument of torture and humiliation? If your brother were killed in an electric chair, would you wear an electric chair around your neck?" I replied that it depends: "If my brother happened to be Jesus of Nazareth and his death in an electric chair brought about my salvation and was the means by which evil was defeated and creation renewed, then he would have transformed a symbol of shame and punishment into something glorious."

One theologian puts it this way: it's "truly godlike to be humble as it is to be exalted."¹⁰ The New Atheists wrongly assume that God must be an egalitarian deity—that he is just like us (see Ps. 50:21).¹¹ We can set aside the false accusation that God is a divine, pompous windbag seeking to have his ego stroked by human flattery. That's the argument of village atheists, not those who have seriously examined the Scriptures.

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4

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

Recall Richard Dawkins's put-down of God, claiming that he breaks into a "monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirted with a rival god."¹ Popular TV icon Oprah Winfrey said that she was turned off to the Christian faith when she heard a preacher affirm that God is jealous. Bill Maher of *Religulous* fame (or infamy) has said much the same thing—that being jealous about having other gods before you just isn't "moral." The New Atheists likewise consider Yahweh to be impatient, jealous, and easily provoked—a petty and insecure deity.

Good Jealousy and Bad Jealousy

As I said in the previous chapter, it's important to define our terms. Jealousy can be a bad thing or a good thing. It's bad to protect the petty; it's good to fiercely guard the precious. If jealousy is rooted in self-centeredness, it is clearly the wrong kind of jealousy. A jealousy that springs from concern for another's well-being, however, is appropriate. Yes, jealousy can be a vice (Gal. 5:20—"enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger"). Yet it can also be a virtue, a "godly jealousy," as Paul put it: "For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin" (2 Cor. 11:2). Paul was concerned for the well-being of the Corinthians. His jealousy didn't spring from hurt pride or self-concern.

Throughout the Bible, we see a God who is a concerned lover. He's full of anguish and dismay when his covenant people pursue non-gods. In the prophetic book of Hosea, God—the loving husband—gets choked up when his wife, Israel, continually cheats on him: "My heart is turned over within Me, all My compassions are kindled" (Hosea 11:8).

When can jealousy be a good thing? In God's case, it's when we're rummaging around in the garbage piles of life and avoiding the ultimate source of satisfaction. It reminds me of a comic strip I once saw of a dog who had been drinking out of a toilet bowl. With water dripping from his snout, Fido looks up to tell us, "It doesn't get any better than this!"

Instead of enjoying fresh spring water, we look for stagnant, crummy-tasting substitutes that inevitably fail us. God laments over Israel: "For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (Jer. 2:13).

The Marriage Analogy



A friend of mine who worked in Christian ministry in Europe for many years told me about a Christian couple he had gotten to know. Somehow the subject of adultery came up in conversation. The seemingly unassuming Dutch wife said that if her husband ever cheated on her, “I will shoot him!” He knew she wasn’t kidding.

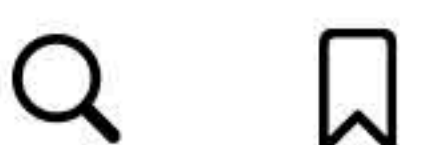
A wife who doesn’t get jealous and angry when another woman is flirting with her husband isn’t really all that committed to the marriage relationship. A marriage without the potential for jealousy when an intruder threatens isn’t much of a marriage. Outrage, pain, anguish—these are the appropriate responses to such a deep violation. God isn’t some abstract entity or impersonal principle, as Dawkins seems to think he should be. He is an engaging, relational God who attaches himself to humans. He desires to be their loving Father and the wise ruler of their lives. In Israel’s case, God’s love is that of a passionate husband. We should be amazed that the Creator of the universe would so deeply connect himself to human beings that he would open himself to sorrow and anguish in the face of human betrayal and rejection.

God opened himself to repeated rejection from his people. He was continuously exasperated with and injured by his people: “How I have been hurt by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me, and by their eyes which played the harlot after their idols” (Ezek. 6:9). God endured much defiance, despite his loving concern for his people: “I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in the way which is not good, following their own thoughts, a people who continually provoke Me to My face” (Isa. 65:2–3).

Spiritual adultery is no petty matter, as Dawkins seems to think. Notice God’s perspective of Israel’s unfaithfulness in Ezekiel 16 and 23. The scenarios described there aren’t exactly suitable for G-rated audiences! In chapter 16, intimate, marital language is used for God’s “marriage” to his people at Mount Sinai—the “time for love.” God entered into a covenant with Israel so that “you became Mine.” God provided lavishly for Israel, but she despised this privilege. Rather than trusting in God, she allied herself with other nations, trusting in their military might and foreign idols rather than in God. “But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your fame”; “you spread your legs to every passer-by to multiply your harlotry” (vv. 15, 25). This graphic language expresses the deep betrayal in Israel’s spiritual adultery and prostitution.

We shouldn’t be surprised that God wanted to wipe out Israel after the golden calf betrayal: “Let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you [Moses] a great nation” (Exod. 32:10). This took place just after Israel had made “vows” to attach herself to Yahweh at Sinai: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Exod. 24:7; cf. v. 3). Israel’s idolatry was like a husband finding his wife in bed with another man—*on their honeymoon!* The reason God is jealous is because he binds himself to his people in a kind of spousal intimacy. So worshiping idols and other gods is a rejection of who he is, just as adultery is a rejection of one’s spouse in marriage.²

When the word *jealous* describes God in Scripture, it’s in the context of idolatry and false worship.³ When we choose this-worldly pursuits over our relationship with God, we engage in spiritual adultery (James 4:4; cf. 2 Cor. 11:2), which provokes God’s righteous jealousy. Unfortunately, a lot of Yahweh-critics who dislike the notion of divine jealousy—especially the New Atheists—



just don't understand why idolatry's such a problem. After all, what's the big deal about bringing a hunk of meat to a statue, right? As has been said, ignorance may be bliss, but it isn't a virtue!

Idolatry is—and always has been—a very seductive enterprise that can get the best of any of us. Idolatry in the ancient Near East involved manipulating reality (“the gods”) through certain rituals and sacrifices to get more kids, crops, and cattle. Chanting to an idol would get people into immediate contact with a god's very essence. And who wants to travel to Yahweh's Jerusalem three times a year when you can conveniently go to the shrine of a personal or family god (like Dagon or Baal) at a nearby grove or high hill (Deut. 12:2; 1 Kings 14:22–24)? Idolatry in the ancient Near East also appealed to the sensual and the indulgent side. Rather than self-restraint in Yahweh worship, one could get drunk at idol feasts as well as engage in ritual sex, gluttony, and adultery, all in the name of “religion.” Furthermore, idolatry in the ancient Near East didn't commit one to improved ethical behavior. As long as you kept your idol “fed,” you didn't have to change your lifestyle. Contrast this with the moral behavior required by Yahweh's people: “all the words which the Lord has spoken we will do!” (Exod. 24:3).⁴

So calling Israel a mere “flirt” in these idolatrous scenarios reflects Dawkins's utter lack of awareness. We could perhaps ask Dawkins, “How strong should a spouse's commitment to a marriage be? How seriously should one treat adultery in a marriage?” Whichever way he'd answer, it would no doubt be revealing.

Divine Vulnerability

Throughout the Old Testament, God is not only passionately concerned for Israel but also frequently in pain at her rebellion and longing for reconciliation. God is a wounded husband who continually attempts to woo his people back into harmony with him. Isaiah 5 portrays God as a vineyard owner who had busied himself with the task of “planting” his people Israel—“the choicest vine”—on a fertile hill, digging all around it, removing its stones. Despite the legitimate expectation of Israel's bearing “good” fruit after all he had done, God is exasperated at Israel's “worthless” yield: “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?” (5:4). Jeremiah similarly writes of God's planting Israel as a “choice vine” and “faithful seed,” but Israel rejects God (Jer. 2:21). The same theme of God's legitimate expectation of repentance and righteousness from Israel is found in Zephaniah 3:7: “I said, ‘Surely you will revere Me, accept instruction.’ So her dwelling will not be cut off according to all that I have appointed concerning her. But they were eager to corrupt all their deeds.”

The psalmist articulates something similar: “I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt; open your mouth wide and I will fill it. But My people did not listen to My voice, and Israel did not obey Me” (81:10–11). Israel's continual faithlessness exasperates God. In Amos 4:6–11, God tries to get the attention of his people by sending plagues, famine, drought, and the like. But despite each divine attempt, the same line is uttered: “Yet you have not returned to Me.”

Likewise in Isaiah 66:4, God says, “I called, but no one answered; I spoke, but they did not listen. And they did evil in My sight and chose that in which I did not delight.” Again, in Ezekiel 18:23, 31–32, God asks, “Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked? . . . Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies. . . . Therefore, repent



and live.” This theme of divine vulnerability⁵ runs throughout the Old Testament, where God is presented as a wounded lover who is reluctant to bring judgment.

Jealousy implies vulnerability and the capacity to experience pain—not the pettiness of a power-hungry deity obsessed with dominating people. Amazingly, the disappointed Husband of Israel only requires her repentance to restore the relationship.⁶

An Anger That Cares

Most Americans are familiar with Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ* painting. This picture is commonly found on nursing home walls or memorial cards given out at funeral homes. Sallman’s portrayal is one of an easily caricatured “meek and mild” Jesus. Though perhaps depicting his approachability and kindness toward children, such pictures can often leave us with a lopsided, sentimental impression of Jesus. No, the real Jesus was not only a friend of sinners and a welcomer of children; he was also a radical, a controversialist, a convicting and even frightening character. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5). The *Head of Christ* is a far cry from the temple-clearing, storm-calming Jesus, who evokes sometimes troubled, sometimes terrified responses: “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?” (Mark 4:41).⁷

Speaking of the temple cleansing, we see genuine, justified anger when Jesus drives out money-changers from the temple (Mark 11; John 2). They had turned a house of worship for God-fearing Gentiles into a place of noise, commercial gain, and nationalistic pride. In our age of pseudotolerant true-for-you-but-not-for-meism, we could use considerably more righteous anger—at the world’s injustices, the greed, the tyrannies, the lies, the spin . . . and our own proud, rationalizing hearts. And the various religious hucksters and exploiters of our day could stand to be driven out of the sphere of public influence.

If we’re not directly touched by any of the world’s many sufferings, sadnesses, and oppressions, our response may be indifferent and apathetic, and a person’s flare-up of anger will make us very uncomfortable. Yet anger is often the first indication that we care. The tragedy is that we’re not angered, not shocked enough.

Anger isn’t necessarily wrong (Eph. 4:26)—indeed, at times it is virtuous. The never-angered person is morally deficient. The slow-to-anger person is the virtuous one. He’s better able to calm disputes or listen well (Prov. 15:18; 16:32; 19:11; cf. James 1:19), but he also opposes injustice and tyranny. Likewise, God is frequently described as being “slow to anger” (e.g., Exod. 34:6). As with jealousy, so with anger: is the anger self-centered or other-centered? Does it reflect profound selfishness or concern for others? On closer inspection, God’s anger doesn’t reflect a self-centeredness.

God’s jealousy and anger spring from love and concern, not from hurt pride or immaturity. The New Atheists resist the notion of God’s rightful prerogatives over humans. The idea of divine judgment or anger or jealousy somehow makes them uncomfortable. But like Narnia’s Aslan, Yahweh, though gracious and compassionate, isn’t to be trifled with. God gets jealous or angry precisely because he cares.

Divine Jealousy to Protect and Benefit Humans



Those claiming that God's jealousy is petty and constricting might liken God to a husband who won't let his wife even *talk* to another man. A more appropriate analogy, however, is a husband who is concerned that his wife is being emotionally drawn toward another man. He wants to protect the preciousness of marital intimacy, which is in the best interests of his wife and their marriage.

Critics like the New Atheists tend to create a false dichotomy between God's gracious rule and human well-being, as though these are opposed to each other.⁸ The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) begins with this question: "What is the chief end of man?" The famous response is: "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." For many in the West (including professing Christians), the chief goal of many individuals is "to further my interests and to enjoy myself forever." Or if God exists, then the Catechism's answer is subconsciously revised to this: "The chief end of God is to make me as comfortable and pain-free as possible."

Philosopher Thomas Nagel has admitted that he doesn't want there to be a God. He acknowledges that in academic circles today there exists a "cosmic authority problem."⁹ If people like Nagel don't want there to be a God (or they want a god who will let them do exactly what they want), then we're back to the problem of denying reality in order to pursue our own agendas. But obviously, God's ultimate role isn't to advance my own (or human) interests and freedom. The existence of God is no mere abstraction or armchair topic. The living God's existence and claim on our lives mean that something has to change!

On the other hand, God's relationship with us isn't a commander-commandee arrangement (similar to the "divine cop in the sky" notion). In that kind of relationship, God's will merely coerces, overriding the choices of human agents. Rather, God seeks the interpersonal intimacy with us in the context of covenant-making. Critics typically paint the picture of two false alternatives: sovereign coercion or total human autonomy. However, if we see God's activity and human nature as harmonious rather than in conflict, a new perspective dawns on us. When God's intentions for us are realized and when we're alert to the divinely given boundaries built into our nature and the world around us, we human beings flourish—that is, we enjoy loving, trusting relationships with God and one another because we're living out the design-plan.

God's jealousy isn't capricious or petty. God is jealous for our best interests. His commands are given "for your good" (Deut. 10:13; cf. 8:16; 30:9). In fact, we only harm ourselves when we live for ourselves and create our own idolatrous God-substitutes. So for God to block the possibility of our knowing him would actually be to *deprive us* of the *greatest possible good*. Author and pastor Tim Keller illustrates how this works for postmoderns:

Instead of telling them they are sinning because they are sleeping with their girlfriends or boyfriends, I tell them that they are sinning because they are looking to their romances to give their lives meaning, to justify and save them, to give them what they should be looking for from God. This idolatry leads to anxiety, obsessiveness, envy, and resentment. I have found that when you describe their lives in terms of idolatry, postmodern people do not give much resistance. Then Christ and his salvation can be presented not (at this point) so much as their only hope for forgiveness, but as their only hope for freedom.¹⁰

When we apply this to God's jealousy, we can say that it's aroused not just to protect a *relationship*. God seeks to protect his *creatures* from profound self-harm. We can deeply damage ourselves



by running after gods made in our own image. God's jealousy is other-centered. As we saw with God's humility, divine jealousy reacts to the human denial that God is God, to the false idea that a relationship with him isn't really needed for ultimate human well-being (John 10:10).

God is the all-good Creator and Life-giver. He desires that his creatures live life as it should be. When a person acts in life-denying ways (e.g., engaging in adultery, pornography, or promise breaking—or simply suppressing the truth about God), God's jealousy surfaces so that the person might abandon his or her death-seeking goals and return to an abundant life found in a life abandoned to God.

Divine jealousy should be seen as God's willing the best for his creatures. C. S. Lewis's insightful perspective puts divine jealousy and human idolatry into proper perspective:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.¹¹

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5

Child Abuse and Bullying?

God's Ways and the Binding of Isaac

Now it came about . . . that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. Abraham called the name of that place The Lord Will Provide. (Gen. 22:1–14)

Occasionally, we'll read in the newspaper or hear on the evening news about certain deluded persons who've murdered someone. Their justification? "God told me to do it!" I've heard some use this line to justify divorcing a spouse in order to marry their personal assistant at work. God's name gets dragged into circumstances or actions that are wholly contrary to his good character. He certainly doesn't want the credit in such cases.

So what do we do with God's startling command to Abraham in Genesis 22:2: "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love . . . and offer him . . . as a burnt offering"? As we'll discuss later in this book, the law of Moses condemned child sacrifice. In fact, this was one of the horrible practices for which God judged the Canaanites. So then doesn't it seem that God's commands are whimsical and capricious in Genesis 22? Why can't God just as well command murder as prohibit it? After all, it looks like he's doing just that to Abraham. This is what one biblical scholar calls "a monstrous test."¹



The bestselling author Bart Ehrman (an agnostic) comments on the *Aqedah*, or “binding,” of Isaac: “The idea that suffering comes as a test from God simply to see if his followers will obey” is illustrated perhaps “more clearly and more horribly” in the offering of Isaac.² Some scholars claim that Abraham *failed* the test by being willing to sacrifice his son; others wonder how this act could serve as a test for godliness. Should Abraham be loved or hated for what he did?

The Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard had a lot to say about this portion of Scripture. Abraham had a “right” to be a great man and thus to do what he did, but “when another does the same, it is sin, a heinous sin.”³ Kierkegaard said that God’s command to Abraham *suspended* typical ethical obligations. God appears to use his authority to violate basic moral standards. God seems to be a relativist of sorts.

If we look at the bigger picture, perhaps we can place some of these troubling matters in proper context. Only then should we look at the specifics in Genesis 22.

The Broader Context

The Theme of the Pentateuch: Abraham’s Faith and Moses’s Unbelief

Biblical scholars have pointed out that the theme of faith holds the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy) together at its seams.⁴ The two major players are Abraham and Moses. Abraham is the positive example of faith, while Moses is the negative example. Abraham had faith without the law of Moses, which was given at Mount Sinai. Despite his wavering, he trusted God’s promise, and so he was declared righteous by God (Gen. 15:6). By contrast, Moses actually failed in his faith—even though he lived under the law given at Sinai. Yes, he played a crucial role in Israel’s history, but we see a critical failure of faith in Moses.

It’s no coincidence that when “have faith/believe” is mentioned in the Pentateuch, it is used positively *before* the giving of the law at Sinai in Exodus 20 (Gen. 15:6; Exod. 4:5; 14:31; 19:9). However, these words are used negatively (“did not believe”) *after* Sinai (Num. 14:11; 20:12; cf. Deut. 1:32; 9:23). The Pentateuch is in large part a contrast between Abraham and Moses. Though Abraham’s faith wavered at times, it continued to grow.

It’s significant that Abraham trusted God—and was declared righteous—*before* the law of Moses came. Even without the law, Abraham kept the intention or purport of the law because he lived *by faith*: “Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws” (Gen. 26:5). Notice the words used: these are post-Sinai law terms used in Deuteronomy (“obeyed,” “charge,” “commandments,” “statutes,” “laws”), yet they apply to Abraham before the law was given. The point is to show how Abraham essentially kept the law and pleased God because he lived by faith (Gen. 15:6).

This connection wasn’t lost on Paul in the New Testament (Rom. 4; Gal. 3–4). As he reread the Scriptures in light of his encounter with Christ, he discovered that Abraham lived by faith and was declared righteous by God. That’s Genesis 15. In Genesis 17 came the covenant of circumcision, and over four hundred years later the law was given at Sinai. In other words, Abraham didn’t need circumcision or the law to be right with God.



On the other hand, Moses had the law, but he failed in his faith; this prevented him from entering the land across the Jordan. He is the negative contrast to Abraham. Though Moses had the law, he died in the wilderness because of his and Aaron's lack of faith at Kadesh (Num. 20). Moses wasn't barred from the Promised Land just because he struck a rock. He had struck rocks before! The Hebrew text makes clear that both Moses and Aaron displayed unbelief in their exasperation. They weren't trusting in God. Moses (along with Aaron, apparently) cried out in frustration, "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" (Num. 20:10). Psalm 106:32–33 reinforces the theme of Moses's *unbelief*. The rebellion of the people prompted Moses to speak rashly (not *act* rashly): "rash words came from Moses' lips" (NIV). So because of the unbelief of both Moses and Aaron, God rebuked both of them: "Because you [Moses and Aaron; the pronoun is plural] have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy" before Israel, "you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (Num. 20:12; cf. v. 24). Later in Deuteronomy 32:51, we read again that at Meribah in Kadesh Moses "broke faith" with God. As a result of this failure of faith, Moses couldn't enter the Promised Land.

God used Abraham as a picture of trust—without the benefit of the law. Abraham serves as an illustration across the ages of how God's people should live. Moses turns out to be a negative example—and a sobering reminder to legalistically minded Jews—that having the law and keeping it scrupulously are inadequate for being right with God. Rather, we're to approach him trustingly, depending on his grace and sufficiency rather than putting confidence in our own sufficiency.

This important theme of Abraham's deep trust in God's promise and faithfulness helped shape Israel's own self-understanding and identity. So it's not surprising to hear Moses's words to Israel at Sinai: "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test [the Hebrew verb is *nasah*] you, and in order that the fear [*yir'ah*] of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin" (Exod. 20:20). These two key verbs link back to Genesis 22. Abraham was *tested* by God (Gen. 22:1) and through this ordeal demonstrated his *fear* of God (v. 12). Abraham's obedience is intended to serve as a model for Israel and to inspire Israel's obedience and solidify their relationship with ("fear of") God.⁵

In fact, one can make the case that the entire Pentateuch speaks to the success of faith in Abraham and the failure of faith in Moses (despite having God's law). So to focus only on God's single command to offer up Isaac misses the big picture.

The Context of Abraham's Call

Let's now take a look at how God begins dealing with Abraham in light of his overarching plan for Israel. If we do so, we'll have a firmer grasp of what is going on with Abraham and Isaac. Otherwise, we'll likely distort the story in Genesis 22.

The first time God told Abr(ah)am to "go" (literally, "going go" [*lek-leka*]) was when he left his home in Ur of the Chaldeans (Babylonians) to go "to the land [*'el-'erets*] which I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). This remarkable act of trust was based on this promise—that God would make through him and his descendants a great nation (12:2–3). But in Genesis 22:2, God commanded Abraham once again to "go," using the *same* construction (literally, *going go* [*lek-leka*]) followed by the familiar-sounding to "one of the mountains of which I will tell you." Indeed, he is to go to the



land (*'el-ha'arets*: “region”) of Moriah. This time Isaac, the covenant son of the promise, is involved. Abraham couldn't have missed the connection being made. Bells are going off in Abraham's mind. God is clearly reminding him of his promise of blessing in Genesis 12 even while he's being commanded to do what seems to be utterly opposed to that promise.

In chapter 12, God had *promised* he would make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars. After Abraham's obedience here, God *confirms* his promise that he will make his offspring as numerous as the stars and the sand on the seashore (22:17). Genesis makes a connection between Abraham's *call* (Gen. 12) and his subsequent *obedience* (Gen. 22). The firmness of faith of Abraham, the father of Israel, was being tested, and this moment would shape the thinking and identity of subsequent generations of Israelites.⁶ As one biblical scholar wrote, “Any Israelite who heard this story would take it to mean that his race owed its existence to the mercy of God and its prosperity to the obedience of their ancestor.”⁷

Abraham had left his home in Ur and given up his *past* for the sake of God's promise. Now he was being asked if he would trust God by apparently surrendering his *future* as well. Everything Abraham ever hoped for was tied up in this son of promise.⁸

The Nearer Context: Hagar and Ishmael

Here we come to the more immediate narrative context—namely, what took place with Abraham's first son, Ishmael, and his mother, Hagar. The Ishmael story turns out to be the preliminary testing ground that informs Abraham's later experience.⁹ Let's not forget that Ishmael was born to Hagar, Sarah's maidservant. Sarah, with Abraham, assumed that her having a *biological* son of promise in her old age wasn't going to work out (16:1–4). So Sarah, figuring that surrogate motherhood must be the way God wanted to fulfill his promise, told Abraham to take Hagar as her substitute—as a second-tier “wife” (v. 3). This, however, turned out to be an ill-conceived plan—a misconception! (We'll talk about this verse later in a future chapter.)

When Hagar conceived and began to despise her mistress, Sarah, this caused much tension, and Sarah drove her away. Yet God met Hagar in her desperation in the wilderness and told her to go back to live with Sarah and Abraham. There Hagar gave birth to Abraham's first son. As Ishmael grew up, Abraham unquestionably became quite attached to his son.

God, however, had different plans. He assured Abraham and Sarah that he wanted the son of promise to come from *both* their bodies, not just Abraham's. Through God's miraculous fulfillment of his promise, Isaac was born. But at the feast held when Isaac was weaned, Ishmael, now a teenager, mocked Isaac (21:9). It had been painful enough for Sarah to have her handmaiden Hagar—rather than herself—give birth to Abraham's first son. But for Ishmael to then scorn Sarah's own biological child was just too much to take. Sarah wanted to send away not only Ishmael but also his mother, Hagar. This created a dilemma for Abraham (21:11). Sending them off would calm Sarah down, but sending Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness meant encountering harsh circumstances and risks—possibly even death.

But God allayed Abraham's fears, reassuring him that Ishmael wouldn't die (21:12–13). In fact, Yahweh had already told him, “I will make him a great nation” (17:20). Hagar herself had been



told that God would “greatly multiply” her descendants (16:10). So Abraham could confidently send Ishmael away with Hagar and entrust them to God’s care.

Then we come to God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham had endured a difficult challenge regarding Ishmael, and he was aware of the promise God had made concerning Ishmael. Though Abraham had sent Ishmael away into the wilderness, God had promised that he would live and become a great nation. Without God’s promise, Abraham would have been wrong to send Hagar and Ishmael away to almost-certain death. So despite Sarah’s anger at Hagar and Ishmael, God assured Abraham that he would provide for Ishmael and that Abraham need not worry that he was doing wrong. God would care for Ishmael (and Hagar) and would fulfill his promises to them. So Abraham “rose early in the morning” (21:14)—just as he would do with Isaac (22:3)—and sent them both away.

In the background was not only God’s assurance regarding Ishmael. God had also provided a miracle son to Abraham—a son who had come from Sarah’s own body—“your *only* son” (Gen. 22:2). This long-awaited son of promise would also become a great nation. Ishmael had been a preliminary test; Isaac would bring an even greater test. Abraham knew that God would fulfill his promise regarding Isaac, but he didn’t know what God would do in the end. All he could do was trust God’s promises and obey. Somehow God *had* to come through! Abraham’s obedience, we now see, was carried out in the context of his awareness of God’s earlier deliverance of Ishmael and of God’s act of providing the miracle child of promise through Sarah.

The Text of Genesis 22

Having looked at the surrounding biblical text, we can hone in on Genesis 22. This text contains additional clues—some of them subtle—to help us better understand what takes place in this powerful, perplexing narrative. Because Abraham already knew God’s faithful—and even tender—character and promises, he was confident that God would somehow fulfill his promise to him, however this would be worked out.

Four things about God’s character emerge as we work through Genesis 22. First, we’re immediately tipped off to the fact that God is *testing* Abraham (v. 1). God doesn’t intend for Isaac to be sacrificed. No, Abraham isn’t yet aware of what the reader knows—namely, that this is only a test.

Second, even the hard command to Abraham is cushioned by God’s tenderness. God’s directive is unusual: “*Please* take your son”—or as another scholar translates it, “Take, *I beg of you*, your only son.”¹⁰ God is remarkably gentle as he gives a difficult order. This type of divine command (as a plea) is rare. Old Testament commentator Gordon Wenham sees here a “hint that the Lord appreciates the costliness of what he is asking.”¹¹ God understands the magnitude of this difficult task. In fact, one commentator states that God is not demanding here; thus, if Abraham couldn’t see God’s broader purposes and so couldn’t bring himself to do this, he wouldn’t “incur any guilt” in declining God’s pleas.¹²

A third indication of God’s good character highlights his faithfulness. God reminded Abraham of “your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac” (v. 2). God’s covenant acknowledgment is apparent: the divine promise to Abraham can’t be fulfilled without Isaac. Abraham is struggling to keep two things in mind: his deep love for Isaac is good and right, and the circumstances surrounding



Isaac's birth clearly showed that God was fulfilling his covenant promise to Abraham. While this is the most fearful and dreadful thing Abraham would ever have to do, he is trying to come to terms with just how God would fulfill his promise through Isaac.

A fourth reminder of God's faithful character is that God is sending Abraham to a mountain in the region of *Moriah*—derived from the Hebrew word *ra'ah*, “provide, see, show.” As we noted earlier, the place “which I will tell you” is linked back to God's initial call to Abram to “go” to “the land which I will *show* you” (12:1, emphasis added). Abraham was also aware of God's provision for Hagar and Ishmael when they first fled. Hagar said (using the same Hebrew word *ra'ah*), “You are a God who *sees*” (16:13). So in the very word *Moriah* (“provision”) we have a hint of salvation and deliverance. Wenham helpfully observes, “Salvation is thus promised in the very decree that sounds like annihilation.”¹³

In all of these ways, we see God's faithful tenderness cushioning the startling harshness of God's command. It's as though God is saying to Abraham, “I'm testing your obedience and allegiance. You don't understand, but in light of all I've done and said to you, trust me. Not even death can nullify the promise I've made.”

God himself told Abraham that it wasn't Hagar who would bear the child of promise—even though Abraham (with Sarah) thought it would be a good idea: “Oh that Ishmael might live before You!” (Gen. 17:18). God replied, “No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son . . . and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him” (17:19). God assured Abraham that Isaac, not Ishmael, was the promised son.

So we can't separate God's *promise* in Genesis 12 and 17 from God's gentle *command* in Genesis 22. Abraham had confidence that even if the child of promise died, God would somehow accomplish his purposes through that very child. Abraham believed God could even raise Isaac from the dead. That's why Abraham told his servants before he headed to Mount Moriah with Isaac, “We will worship and then *we* will come back to you” (Gen. 22:5 NIV, emphasis added). No wonder the author of Hebrews observed that since Abraham “had received the promises,” he “considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead” (11:17, 19). In *some* way, God would fulfill his promises. Abraham was confident of this—and commended for it. After all, Abraham confidently affirmed a few chapters earlier, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” (Gen. 18:25).

Abraham knew that God's faithful character meant that God wouldn't break his promises. Not only is it “impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18; cf. Titus 1:2), but after promising to make Abraham into a great nation and to bring his descendants into the Promised Land, God himself “passed between the pieces” of animals in a dramatic display of pyrotechnics (Gen. 15:17 NIV). According to some scholars, this puzzling gesture of “cutting” a covenant indicates a self-curse: May I be like this cut-up animal if I don't fulfill my promise (see Jer. 34:18). Whatever a *divine* self-curse might mean, it shows how supremely dedicated God was to keeping his covenant (e.g., Jer. 33:19–26).

Philosophical Reflections on God's Command to Abraham

If Abraham was commanded to take an innocent life, should we revise the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder”? We're left with the question: “Could taking an innocent life ever be morally permitted?”¹⁴



Consider the following statements:

1. God's command to do X obligates person Y to do X.
2. It is wrong to kill innocent human beings.
3. God commanded Abraham to take an innocent life.

Can we hold all three of these statements with consistency? We can accept statement 1—that we should do what a good God commands. (After all, God's commands are rooted in his good nature and purposes.) On the other hand, statement 2 *normally* holds, but we must consider the specific context to see whether it always holds—apart from God's command. Could it be that under certain conditions taking an innocent life might be morally justified?

Take the specific case of an ectopic pregnancy: the fertilized human egg remains and grows in the woman's fallopian tube. If the embryo continues to grow without intervention, the mother will surely die. Ethicists generally agree that in this tragic case, it is morally permissible to take an innocent human life. The reason given is a self-defense argument—in order to protect the mother's life. Without intervention, both will die.

Now take the September 11 terrorist attacks. When four planes were hijacked, putting many more lives at risk than those of the innocent passengers, the president gave orders to shoot down the planes, which had suddenly become weapons. Again, while tragic, such a command was justified in an attempt to stop the killing of many more innocent persons.

These exceptional cases permit the taking of innocent human life. All things being equal, such actions would be morally permissible. But let's explore further.

What if the world of humans turned out to be different from the way we happen to find it? The philosopher John Hare provides this thought experiment. What if God rearranged the world so that it had different features and thus different ways to apply moral principles? Say that God willed that at the age of eighteen, humans should kill each other but that God would immediately bring them back to life and in robust health. In that case, killing people at this age wouldn't be a big deal—or *that* big a deal.¹⁵ Yes, in this world, dead people stay dead (we're setting aside supernatural intervention, of course!). That is one of the reasons that killing innocent people in the actual world is wrong.

Let's shift to the unique historical setting of Genesis 22. We've seen that the narrative context of Genesis reveals repeated divine assurances and confirmations that Isaac was the child of promise and instrument of blessings to the nations. Abraham truly knew that Isaac would live to adulthood and have offspring in fulfillment of God's promise; so, if necessary, God would bring Isaac back from the dead: “*we will return*,” Abraham promised his servants. So if Abraham *knew* God would fulfill his covenant promise, then Abraham's taking innocent human life in this case—according to God's command—was morally permissible.

Keep in mind that our ethical understanding is partly shaped by certain facts about the world. If we lived in a world in which hitting people in the head helped improve their health rather than causing harm and pain, then such actions would be encouraged. Yes, in the actual world, hitting people in the head usually causes harm. However, this illustration shows that the command



“Don’t hit people in the head” depends on certain givens in the world. If certain facts about the world were different, then the command wouldn’t be binding on us.

So what if the facts about the world include a good God who specifically reveals himself and may issue extraordinary commands in specific, unique contexts and with morally sufficient reasons? Even if the critic believes the story of Abraham to be historically unreliable, that is irrelevant for our purposes. The critic’s argument is based on the assumption that this event took place in accordance with the text. The critic’s task, then, is to show why Abraham, given what he knew, shouldn’t obey God’s command. After all, Abraham knew the outcome: taking Isaac’s life would only mean that God would resuscitate him so that God’s covenant promise would be fulfilled. Yes, without God’s command, which assumes covenant promises, Abraham would have been murdering his son, but that’s not what we have here.

We’ve seen that statement 2—taking innocent human life is morally wrong—has its own set of exceptions (e.g., an ectopic pregnancy). Such exceptions aside, the critic wrongly assumes that this statement is absolutely correct while ignoring or rejecting certain truths about reality. He is ignorant of a supernatural being who is able to bring people back from the dead. He rejects the fact that God acts in history, makes promises, makes good on them, and has morally sufficient reasons for doing what he does. Statement 2 applies in a world in which dead people don’t come back to life after being killed. So God’s command wasn’t immoral or contradictory.

The New Testament Perspective on Abraham and Isaac

Jesus as the Second Isaac

Commenting on Genesis 22, Bart Ehrman observes, “The God who had promised [Abraham] a son now wants him to destroy that son; the God who commands his people not to murder has now ordered the father of the Jews to sacrifice his own child.”¹⁶ Yet just as Caiaphas the high priest spoke better than he knew about Jesus (John 11:47–52), so Ehrman is speaking better than he knows without embracing the theological implications. Let’s back up a bit, though, to put things into perspective.

In his book *The Crucified God*, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann quotes the Jewish writer Elie Wiesel, who powerfully wrote in his book *Night* on his own horrifying experiences at Auschwitz, the infamous Nazi concentration camp. Wiesel recounts one event that is particularly moving:

The SS hanged two Jewish men and a youth in front of the whole camp. The men died quickly, but the death throes of the youth lasted for half an hour. “Where is God? Where is he?” someone asked behind me. As the youth still hung in torment in the noose after a long time, I heard the man call again, “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice inside myself answer: “Where is he? He is here. He is hanging there on the gallows.”

What is Moltmann’s profound response to Wiesel’s assessment? “Any other answer would be blasphemy.” The Christian takes strength and comfort in the fact that God suffers with us and even enters into our suffering—particularly in the person of Jesus of Nazareth on the shameful, humiliating cross. Indeed, a God who doesn’t suffer “would make God a demon.” An indifferent God would condemn human beings to indifference as well.¹⁷



The story of Abraham and his “one and only son” Isaac actually foreshadows God the Father’s offering the redemptive sacrifice of the “second Isaac”—his “one and only Son” (John 3:16 NET). Rather than this being forced upon the Son—divine “child abuse,” as Richard Dawkins calls it—the Father is not pitted against the Son. Christ willingly laid down his life and then took it up again (John 10:15, 17–18). God *sent* his Son into the world (John 3:17) to bear Israel’s and humanity’s curse and alienation on the cross. Yet, God the Son himself *came* into the world (John 9:39) to save it. With three wills of Father, Son, and Spirit united as one, the Triune God gave his very self to rescue and redeem humankind: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19).

Abraham’s unquestioning yet difficult obedience to the covenant God not only helped shape and confirm Israel’s identity in Abraham but also provided a context for understanding God’s immense self-giving love in the gift of his Son. When Abraham’s dedication to God’s command was confirmed, God said, “Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me” (Gen. 22:12).¹⁸ Harking back to Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, Paul uses this story to remind believers of God’s supreme dedication to them: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac anticipated God’s self-sacrifice in Christ. Abraham demonstrated his faithfulness to God, and God’s sacrifice demonstrated his faithfulness to us.¹⁹ The kind of demand God made of Abraham was one the Triune God was willing to carry out himself. So deep is God’s love for us (Rom. 8:31–32) that the late Scottish theologian Thomas Torrance was willing to go so far as to say that “God loves us more than he loves himself.”²⁰

Was the Crucifixion Divine Child Abuse?

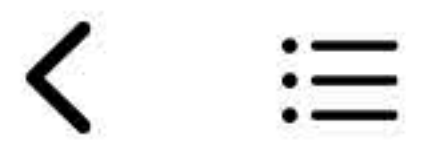
Dawkins, we’ve seen, considers the command for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as tantamount to “child abuse and bullying.” We’ve responded to this charge, but we should go further: was the crucifixion an instance of divine child abuse? Does the crucifixion justify violence or perhaps passivity in the face of injustice?

We’ve seen that the charge of “abuse” doesn’t take into account the full scope of the biblical evidence—as though crucifixion was forced on the Son. Consider 1 Peter 2:21–25:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (NIV)

We have no passive victim here. Jesus’s death on the cross was part of the predetermined plan of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit. Each one suffered in this reconciling work. In *weakness*, Jesus actually *conquered* sin and the powers of darkness (John 12:31; Col. 2:15).

According to John’s Gospel, as we’ve seen, Jesus’s moment of being “lifted up” or “glorified” comes in the hour of God’s great humiliation. Rather than thinking of the crucifixion as the *absence*



of God—with the darkening skies and the cry of dereliction (“My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”)—*this is actually the moment when God’s presence is most evident.*

God shows himself in the crucifixion through a palpable darkness, an earthquake, and the tearing of the temple curtain in two. (Compare this event with the darkening skies, thundering, and God’s voice at Mount Sinai.) God’s great moment in history comes when all seems lost, when God seems defeated. God’s glory is revealed in God’s self-humiliation. No, the crucifixion was no act of divine child abuse. It was the history-defining event in which God gave his very self for humanity’s sake.

Further Reading

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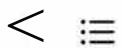
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6

God's Timeless Wisdom?

Incremental Steps for Hardened Hearts

Someone posted an "Open Letter to Dr. Laura" on the internet. I Dr. Laura Schlessinger, of course, is the Jewish author and (until recently) radio talk show host who offers practical advice about relationships, parenting, and ethical dilemmas based on Old Testament principles. Here's part of that letter, which is saturated with sarcasm:

Dear Dr. Laura:

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate.

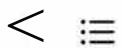
I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to follow them:

- I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?
- I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?
- A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev. 11:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?
- Leviticus 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?
- Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Leviticus 19:27. How should they die?
- I know from Leviticus 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?
- My uncle has a farm. He violates Leviticus 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend) . . .

I know you have studied these things extensively; so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Your devoted disciple and adoring fan.

Twelfth-century rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) counted out 613 distinct laws (365 prohibitions, 248 positive commands) in the Pentateuch. Talk about dos and don'ts! It's no secret that Westerners find many of these commands—and the ancient Near Eastern world in general—baffling. They seem millions of miles removed from us—all the regulations about food laws and skin



diseases, not to mention prohibitions against cutting the edges of one's beard, wearing tattoos, or cooking a kid goat in its mother's milk. Israel's perplexing precepts, principles, and punishments seem odd, arbitrary, and severe.

When the New Atheists refer to the "ubiquitous weirdness" of the Bible, this may simply be the knee-jerk reaction of cultural snobbery or emotional dislike. It may also reflect a lack of patience to truly understand a world different from ours. C. S. Lewis warns against *chronological snobbery*-the "uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited."²

How would *you* respond to the challenges of the open letter? Our discussion in part 3 will look at laws that may strike us as random, bizarre, and harsh. While the Old Testament world *is* in many ways a strange world to us moderns, to be fair-minded, we should at least try to understand it better.

After some introductory thoughts to frame the discussion, we'll look at issues related to cleanliness and the treatment of women and slaves, concluding our discussion with Israelite warfare. Hopefully, this lengthy but popular-level discussion will help put Israel's laws and ancient Near Eastern assumptions into proper perspective.

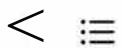
The Law of Moses: Inferior and Provisional

On Palm Sunday in 1865, the brilliant Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered to the tenacious, gritty Northern general Ulysses S. Grant-sometimes called "Unconditional Surrender" Grant. This day at the Appomattox Court House was the decisive end to a costly war. Well over six hundred thousand men were killed in the Civil War-2 percent of the United States' population-and three million fought in it.

Despite the North's victory, the Emancipation Proclamation that preceded it (January 1, 1863), and the attempt at Reconstruction in the South, many whites did not change their mind-set in regard to blacks. As a nation, we've found that proclamations and civil rights legislations may be law, but such legalities don't eradicate racial prejudice from human minds. A good deal of time was required to make significant headway in the pursuit of racial justice.

Let's switch gears. Imagine a Western nation or representatives from the West who think it best to export democracy to, say, Saudi Arabia. Think of the obstacles to overcome! A radical change of mind-set would be required, and simply changing laws wouldn't alter the thinking in Saudi Arabia. In fact, you could probably imagine large-scale cultural opposition to such changes.

When we journey back over the millennia into the ancient Near East, we enter a world that is foreign to us in many ways. Life in the ancient Near East wouldn't just be alien to us-with all of its strange ways and assumptions. We would also see a culture whose social structures were badly damaged by the fall. Within this context, God raised up a covenant nation and gave the people laws to live by; he helped to create a culture for them. In doing so, he adapted his ideals to a people whose attitudes and actions were influenced by deeply flawed structures. As we'll see with regard to servitude, punishments, and other structures, a range of regulations and statutes in Israel reveals a God who accommodates. Yet contrary to the common Neo-atheists' caricatures, these laws weren't the permanent, divine ideal for all persons everywhere. God informed his peo-



ple that a new, enduring covenant would be necessary (Qer. 31; Ezek. 36). By the Old Testament's own admission, the Mosaic law was inferior and future looking.

Does that mean that God's ideals turn up only in the New Testament? No, the ideals are established at the very beginning (Gen. 1-2). The Old Testament makes clear that *all* humans are God's image-bearers; they have dignity, worth, and moral responsibility. And God's ideal for marriage is a one-flesh monogamous union between husband and wife. Also, certain prohibitions in the law of Moses against theft, adultery, murder, and idolatry have enduring relevance. Yet when we look at God's dealings with fallen humans in the ancient Near East, these ideals were ignored and even deeply distorted. So God was at work in seeking to restore or move toward this ideal.

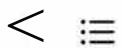
We know that many products on the market have a built-in, planned obsolescence. They're designed for the short-term; they're not intended to be long-lasting and permanent. The same goes for the law of Moses: it was never intended to be enduring. It looked forward to a new covenant (Qer. 31; Ezek. 36). It's not that the Mosaic law was bad and therefore needed to be replaced. The law was good (Rom. 7:12), but it was a temporary measure that was less than ideal; it was in need of replacement and fulfillment.

Though a necessary part of God's unfolding plan, the Sinai legislation wasn't God's final word. As the biblical scholar N. T. Wright affirms, "The Torah [law of Moses at Sinai] is given for a specific period of time, and is then set aside-not because it was a bad thing now happily abolished, but because it was a good thing whose purpose had now been accomplished."³ This is the message of the New Testament book of Hebrews: the old Mosaic law and other Old Testament institutions and figures like Moses and Joshua were prefiguring "shadows" that would give way to "substance" and completion. Or as Paul put it in Galatians 3:24, the law was a "tutor" for Israel to prepare the way for Christ.

Incremental Steps toward the Ideal

How then did God address the patriarchal structures, primogeniture (rights of the firstborn), polygamy, warfare, servitude/slavery, and a number of other fallen social arrangements that were permitted because of the hardness of human hearts? He met Israel partway. As Jesus stated it in Matthew 19:8, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way." We could apply this passage to many problematic structures within the ancient Near Eastern context: "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted *servitude* and *patriarchy* and *warfare* and the like, but from the beginning it has not been this way." They were not ideal and universal.

After God invited all Israelites-male and female, young and old-to be a nation of priests to God, he gave them a simple covenant code (Exod. 20:22- 23:19). Following on the heels of this legislation, Israel rebelled against God in the golden calf incident (Exod. 32). High priests would also have their own rebellion by participating in deviant, idolatrous worship (Lev. 10). As a result of Israel's turning from God, he gave them more stringent laws (Qer. 7; cf. Gal. 3:19). In the New Testament, Paul assumes that God had been putting up with inferior, less-than-ideal societal structures and human disobedience:



- Acts 17:30: Previously, God "overlooked the times of ignorance" and is "now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent."
- Romans 3:25: God has now "demonstrate[d] His righteousness" in Christ, though "in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed."

Like two sides of the same coin, we have *human* hard-heartedness and *divine* forbearance. God *put up with* many aspects of human fallenness and adjusted accordingly. (More on this below.)

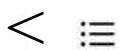
So Christopher Hitchens's reaction to Mosaic laws ("we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human animals") actually points us in the *right* direction in two ways. First, the Mosaic law was temporary and, as a whole, isn't universal and binding upon all humans or all cultures. Second, Mosaic times were indeed "crude" and "uncultured" in many ways. So Sinai legislation makes a number of moral improvements without completely overhauling ancient Near Eastern social structures and assumptions. God "works with" Israel as he finds her. He meets his people where they are while seeking to show them a higher ideal in the context of ancient Near Eastern life. As one writer puts it, "If human beings are to be treated as real human beings who possess the power of choice, then the 'better way' must come gradually. Otherwise, they will exercise their freedom of choice and turn away from what they do not understand."⁴

Given certain fixed assumptions in the ancient Near East, God didn't impose legislation that Israel wasn't ready for. He moved *incrementally*. As stated repeatedly in the Old Testament and reinforced in the New Testament, the law of Moses was far from ideal. Being the practical God he is, Yahweh (the Old Testament title for the covenant-making God) met his people where they were, but he didn't want to leave them there. God didn't banish all fallen, flawed, ingrained social structures when Israel wasn't ready to handle the ideals. Taking into account the *actual*, God encoded more *feasible* laws, though he directed his people toward moral improvement. He condescended by giving Israel a jumping-off place, pointing them to a better path.

As we move through the Scriptures, we witness a moral advance-or, in many ways, a movement toward restoring the Genesis ideals. In fact, Israel's laws reveal dramatic moral improvements over the practices of the other ancient Near Eastern peoples. God's act of incrementally "humanizing" ancient Near Eastern structures for Israel meant diminished harshness and an elevated status of debt-servants, even if certain negative customs weren't fully eliminated.⁵

So when we read in Joshua 10:22-27 that Joshua killed five Canaanite kings and hung their corpses on trees all day, we don't have to explain away or justify such a practice. Such actions reflect a less morally refined condition. Yet these sorts of texts remind us that, in the unfolding of his purposes, God can use heroes such as Joshua within their context and work out his redemptive purposes despite them. And, as we'll see later on, warfare accounts in Joshua are actually quite tame in comparison to the barbarity of other ancient Near Eastern accounts.

So rather than looking at Scripture from a post-Enlightenment critique (which, as we'll see later, is itself rooted in the Christian influence on Western culture), we can observe that *Scripture itself* acknowledges the inferiority of certain Old Testament standards. The Old Testament offers national Israel various resources to guide them regarding what is morally ideal. God's legislation is



given to a less morally mature culture that has imbibed the morally inferior attitudes and sinful practices of the ancient Near East.

Note too that common ancient Near Eastern worship patterns and rituals-sacrifices, priesthood, holy mountains/places, festivals, purification rites, circumcision-are found in the law of Moses. For example, we find in Hittite law a sheep being substituted for a man.⁶ In his providence, God appropriated certain symbols and rituals familiar to Israel and infused them with new meaning and significance in light of his saving, historical acts and his covenant relationship with Israel.⁷ This "redemption" of ancient rituals and patterns and their incorporation into Israel's own story reflect common human longings to connect with "the sacred" or "the transcendent" or to find grace and forgiveness. In God's historical redemption of Israel and later with the coming of Christ, the Lamb of God, these kinds of rituals and symbols were fulfilled in history and were put in proper perspective.

Instead of glossing over some of the inferior moral attitudes and practices we encounter in the Old Testament, we should freely acknowledge them. We can point out that they fall short of the ideals of Genesis 1-2 and affirm with our critics that we don't have to advocate such practices for all societies. We can also show that any of the objectionable practices we find in the Old Testament have a contrary witness in the Old Testament as well.⁸

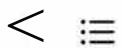
The Redemptive Movement of Scripture

The Old Testament's laws exhibit a redemptive movement within Scripture. It's easy to get stuck on this or that isolated verse-all the while failing to see the underlying redemptive spirit and movement of Scripture that unfold and progress. For example, William Webb's book *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*⁹ unpacks this "redemptive-movement" perspective found in Scripture. The contrast is the static interpretation that rigidly "parks" at certain texts without considering the larger movement of Scripture.

Some people might ask, "Is this some sort of relativistic idea-that certain laws were right for Old Testament Israel but now there's another standard that's right for us?" Not at all! Keep in mind the following thoughts we've already touched on:

- God's ultimate ideals regarding human equality and dignity as well as the creational standard of marriage made their appearance at the very beginning (Gen. 1-2).
- The ancient Near East displays a deviation from these ideals in fallen social structures and human hard-heartedness.
- Incremental steps are given to Old Testament Israel that tolerate certain moral deficiencies but encourage Israel to strive higher.

So the Old Testament isn't affirming relativism-that was true in the Old Testament but not in the New Testament. God's ideals were already in place at creation, but God accommodated himself to human hard-heartedness and fallen social structures. Half a loaf is better than none-something we take for granted in the give-and-take of the political process in the West. In other words, the idea that you can make progress toward the ideal, even if you can't get there all at once, is a far cry



from relativism. Rather, your eye is still set on the ideal, and you're incrementally moving toward it, but the practicalities of life "on the ground" make it difficult to implement the ideal all at once. Likewise, the Sinai laws were moving in the right direction even if certain setbacks remained.

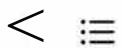
As we progress through Scripture, we see with increasing clarity how women and servants (slaves) are affirmed as human beings with dignity and worth. Let's take slaves, for instance:¹⁰

- Original ancient Near Eastern culture: The general treatment of slaves could be very brutal and demeaning, and slaves were typically at the mercy of their masters; runaway slaves had to be returned to masters on pain of death.
- Old Testament improvement on ancient Near Eastern culture: Though various servant/slave laws are still problematic, the Old Testament presents a redemptive move toward an ultimate ethic: there were limited punishments in contrast to other ancient Near Eastern cultures; there was a more humanized attitude toward servants/slaves; and runaway foreign slaves were given refuge in Israel.
- New Testament improvement on Old Testament: Slaves (in the Roman Empire) were incorporated into the body of Christ without distinction from masters (Gal. 3:28); masters were to show concern for their slaves; slaves were encouraged to gain freedom (1 Cor. 7:20-22). Note, though, that the Roman Empire had institutionalized slavery-in contrast to the Old Testament's humanized indentured servitude. So the New Testament writers had to deal with a new setting, one that was a big moral step backward.
- Ultimate ideal: This includes the genuine realization of creation ideals in Genesis 1:26-27, in which God's image-bearers live and work together harmoniously and are fairly, graciously treated; they are viewed as full persons and equals; and genuine humanness is restored in Christ, the second Adam/the new man.

While such a redemptive movement operates for women and servants/slaves in Scripture, the same cannot be said for homosexual activity. This action is consistently viewed negatively-a departure from God's creational design-plan. Although I go into much detail elsewhere on the topic of homosexuality,¹¹ let me briefly address it in this redemptive-movement discussion. Rather than revealing some progression in attitudes regarding homosexual activity, Scripture from beginning to end is uniformly negative in its evaluation. Homosexual behavior, though quite common in the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world, was simply "alien to the Jewish and Christian ethos."¹²

Remember that homosexual *acts-not* simply *inclinations/tendencies-were* judged to be immoral by the biblical authors. No redemptive movement exists to advance homosexual acts toward increased moral acceptability.

Some claim that prohibitions against homosexual acts were "just cultural" or simply "on the same level" as the kosher or clothing laws given to Israel to set her apart from her pagan neighbors. This is too quick. Actually, the Mosaic law also prohibits adultery, bestiality, murder, and theft. Surely these go far beyond the temporary measures of eating shrimp or pork.



How then does this redemptive movement show itself in Scripture? As an illustration, consider the progression from Moses's permitting a certificate of divorce in Deuteronomy 24: 1-4 to Jesus's discussion of this in Matthew 19. Jesus acknowledged the permitting-not commanding-of divorce in Deuteronomy 24 due to human hard-heartedness. Yet Jesus didn't simply "park" at this Old Testament passage and woodenly interpret it, as his religious opponents did. He considered the redemptive component of this legislation. The certificate of divorce was to protect the wife; a vulnerable divorced woman typically had to remarry to escape poverty and shame by coming under the shelter of a husband. This law took into consideration the well-being of the wife so that she wouldn't be divorced and taken back and then dumped once more at the whim of her former husband.

Many religious leaders of Jesus's day had a stilted interpretation of this passage, making it difficult for them to see that Moses wasn't commanding an absolute ethic. They couldn't see beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the text. This conflict of interpretations is similar to the one in Mark 2:23-28: Jesus looked to the spirit of the Sabbath legislation, informing his critics that "the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath" (v. 27 NET).

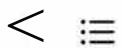
Jesus instructively pointed out that human hard-heartedness was behind such legislation on divorce (Matt. 19:8). After all, God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16); that's certainly *not* ideal. Instead, God desires that a husband and a wife cling to each other in lifelong love and commitment (Gen. 2:24). Yet the religious leaders of Jesus's day approached the Old Testament so legalistically that they missed the spirit behind the Mosaic legislation.

Throughout this book, we'll repeat the message: *Israel's Old Testament covenant wasn't a universal ideal and was never intended to be so.* The Mosaic covenant anticipated a better covenant. So when Sam Harris insists that consistent Bible believers should stone their children for believing heretical ideas, he's actually behind the times! As we move from Old Testament to New Testament, from national Israel to an interethnic Israel (the church), we see a shift from a covenant designed for a nation-with its own civil laws and judicial system-to a new arrangement for God's people scattered throughout the nations of the world and whose citizenship is a heavenly one. In the Old Testament, the death penalty could be carried out for adultery, for instance. Yet when we get to the New Testament, the people of God-no longer a national, civic entity-are to deal much differently with adultery. The professing Christian who refuses to stop his adulterous behavior after appropriate warning and loving concern is disciplined by (hopefully temporary) excommunication (1 Cor. 5:1-5). The Christian can agree that while adultery may be tolerated legally *by the state* (we don't jail people for it), it shouldn't be tolerated *in the church*. The goal of all such (hopefully temporary) discipline of removal is restoration to fellowship-that "his spirit may be saved" (v. 5).

So as we look at many of these Mosaic laws, we must appreciate them in their historical context, as God's gracious, temporary provision. Yet we should also look at the underlying spirit and movement across the sweep of salvation history.

Israel's History: Differing Stages, Different Demands

Israel's story involves a number of stages or contexts.¹³



Stage #1: Ancestral wandering clan (*mishpachah*): Genesis 10:31-32

Stage #2: Theocratic people/nation (*'am, gay*): Genesis 12:2; Exodus 1:9; 3:7; Judges 2:20

Stage #3: Monarchy, institutional state, or kingdom (*mamlakah, malkut*): 1 Samuel 24:20; 1 Chronicles 28:5

Stage #4: Afflicted remnant (*she'erit*): Jeremiah 42:4; Ezekiel 5:10

Stage #5: Postexilic community/assembly of promise (*qahal*): Ezra 2:64; Nehemiah 13:1

With these differing contexts come differing ethical demands. Each new situation calls for differing ethical responses or obligations corresponding to them. Don't get the wrong idea, however. It's not as though this view advocates "situation ethics"-that in some situations, say, adultery is wrong, but in other situations it might be "the loving thing to do."

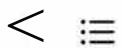
Rather, the Old Testament supplies us with plenty of permanent moral insights from each of these stages. So during the wandering clan stage, we gain enduring insights about commitments of mutual love and concern as well as the importance of reconciliation in overcoming conflict. The patriarchs trusted in a covenant-making God; this God called for full trust as he guided them through difficult, unforeseeable circumstances. And during Israel's theocratic stage, an enduring insight is the need to acknowledge that all blessings and prosperity come from God's hand-that they aren't a right but a gift of grace. The proper response is gratitude and living holy lives in keeping with Israel's calling.

Again, what we're emphasizing is far from moral relativism; it's just that along with these historical changes came differing ethical challenges. During the wandering clan stage, for instance, Abraham and the other patriarchs had only accidental or exceptional political involvements. And even when Abraham had to rescue Lot after a raid (Gen. 14), he refused to profit from political benefactors. Through a covenant-bond, Yahweh was the vulnerable patriarchs' protector and supplier.

After this, Israel had to wait 430 years and undergo bondage in Egypt until the bag of Amorite sins was filled to the point of bursting (Gen. 15:16). God certainly didn't act hastily against the Canaanites! God delivered Israel out of slavery, providing a place for her to live and making her a political entity, a history-making nation. A theocracy was then formed with its own religious, social, and political environment.

To acquire land to live as a theocracy and eventually to pave the way for a coming Redeemer-Messiah, warfare (as a form of judgment on fully ripened sin) was involved. God used Israel to neutralize Canaanite military strongholds and drive out a people who were morally and spiritually corrupt-beyond redemption. The Canaanites had sunk below the hope of moral return, although God wouldn't turn away those who recognized God's justice and his power in delivering Israel from Egypt (such as Rahab and her family). This settling of the land was a situation quite different from the wandering clan stage, and it required a different response.

Later, when many of God's people were exiled in Babylon, they were required to handle this situation differently than in the previous theocratic stage. They were to build gardens, settle down, have children, and pray for the welfare of Babylon-the very enemy that had displaced them by



carrying them into exile Qer. 29:4-7). Israel's obligations and relationship to Gentile nations hardly remained fixed or static.

The "Is-Ought" Fallacy

Christopher Hitchens mentions "the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel."¹⁴ In fact, the Old Testament is full of characters who are deeply flawed and all too human. The critic wonders, "What kind of role model is Abraham (who lies about Sarah), or Moses (who murders an Egyptian), or David (who power-rapes Bathsheba and then arranges to have her husband, Uriah, killed)?" The critic has a point: this isn't the way things ought to be done. But the biblical authors often don't comment on such actions because (at least in part) they assume they don't need to. In other words, *is* doesn't mean *ought*; the way biblical characters *happen to act* isn't necessarily an *endorsement* of their behavior.

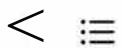
Here's a question we should be careful to ask: What kind of example are they—morally excellent, evil/immoral, or somewhere in between? Indeed, 1 Corinthians 10 refers to the "ungrateful and mutinous" children of Israel who are full of stubbornness and treachery. They end up serving as vivid *negative* examples, and we should avoid imitating them. We can reject the notion that "if it's in the Bible, it must have God's seal of approval."

Take King David. He's more like a figure in Greek tragedies—a hero with deep flaws, a mixed moral bag. David is a lot like you and me. He illustrates the highs and lows of moral success and failure. Old Testament scholar John Barton puts it this way: "The story of David handles human anger, lust, ambition, and disloyalty without ever commenting explicitly on these things but by telling its tale in such a way that the reader is obliged to look them in the face and to recognize his or her affinity with the characters in whom they are exemplified."¹⁵

Biblical writers are often subtly deconstructing major characters like Gideon and Solomon, who are characterized by flawed leadership and spiritual compromise.¹⁶ On closer inspection, the hero status accorded to Abraham, Moses, and David in the Old Testament (and echoed in the New Testament) is rooted not in their moral perfection but in their uncompromising dedication to the cause of Yahweh and their rugged trust in the promises of God rather than lapsing into the idolatry of many of their contemporaries.

Also, many of Israel's regulations are casuistic—instances of case law. That is, what rules are to be in place *if* such-and-such a scenario presents itself? These scenarios aren't necessarily being endorsed or applauded as good or ideal. For example, *if* someone steals another's possessions or *if* someone wants to get a divorce, *then* certain actions are to be taken in these inferior circumstances. Stealing *isn't* a good thing, and neither is divorce!

Unlike the abstracted ancient Near Eastern law codes, the Mosaic law is surrounded by lengthy narratives that often illustrate ethical life for Israel. Whether through failure, success, or something in between, biblical characters and events often put flesh and bones on ethical commands. Yes, the prologue and epilogue of Hammurabi's Code is full of self-exaltation and ethical promises, but it's fairly ahistorical. In fact, as we compare the Old Testament to other ancient Near Eastern worldviews—including beginnings, history, covenant, ethics, and theology—any surface differences



fall away. As John Oswalt has recently argued, the Old Testament presents an utterly unique religious outlook that sets itself apart from its ancient Near Eastern counterparts.¹⁷

On another note, Hammurabi claims merely *to speak for* the deity Shamash; the Hittites claimed the sun god established the laws of the land. Moses, on the other hand, isn't the legislator on God's behalf. Rather, the law portrays a personally interactive God who throughout speaks in the first person: ¹⁸ "If you afflict him [the widow or the orphan] at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled" (Exod. 22:23-24); again, "You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell" (Num. 35:34). God's historical action of delivering enslaved Israel from Egypt becomes a model for how Israel is to live—for example, how to treat aliens and the disadvantaged in their midst.

Does this mean that humans can't use their judgment to create new laws? Not at all! Moses followed his father-in-law's advice to create a judicial hearing system so that he wouldn't be overworked (Exod. 18); David established a statute about giving a fair share to those who fought *and* to those who guarded their baggage (1 Sam. 30:22-25).

Of course, we should remember that just because the biblical text *claims* historicity and divine involvement, this doesn't yet *prove* anything. However, as Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen and others have argued, as time goes on, the once-doubted historical claims of the Old Testament—whether the cost of slaves in the ancient Near East, camels on livestock lists during the time of Abraham, the kingship of David, the mines of Solomon, the metallurgy of the Philistines, or the existence of the Hittites—turn out to be anchored in ancient Near Eastern history.¹⁹ The Old Testament portrays a God concerned enough to enter into and act in history, and these actual events and interactions are to shape and inspire the character and actions of the people of God.

These then are some important issues that will help us as we approach the law of Moses—a gracious gift temporarily given to national Israel that bridged God's ideals and the realities of ancient Near Eastern life and human hard-heartedness. Some of the troubling, harsh, and seemingly arbitrary Old Testament laws—though inferior and less than morally optimal—are often an improvement on what we see in the rest of the ancient Near East. God had to settle for less than the best with national Israel; however, he still desired moral improvement and spiritual obedience, despite fallen social structures and human rebellion.

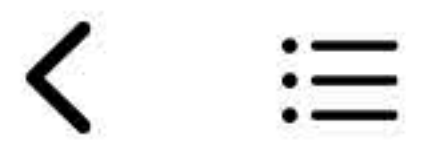
Much in the Old Testament visibly reminds us of God's abundant grace despite human sin and fall-damaged social structures. We regularly see God work in and through sinful human beings—as inefficient as it seems!—to bring to pass his overarching purposes.

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7

The Bible's Ubiquitous Weirdness?

Kosher Foods, Kooky Laws? (I)

Imagine a triangle with the following categories: *God* at the top corner with *God's people* and *the land of Israel* at the bottom corners. The law given to Israel by Moses emphasized these three intimately connected angles—the *theological*, the *social*, and the *economic*. These intertwined themes undergirded God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai. The land (the economic) is a gift of God (the theological) to his covenant people (the social). So when a neighbor, say, moves boundary stones to enlarge his own territory, this has a social impact, affecting his neighbor's livelihood. This act of theft from a neighbor isn't just a societal violation; it's a violation against God as well. Or consider how adultery throws a family into upheaval, not to mention creating a tear in Israel's social fabric. It was an offense against God as well. So when the one God makes a covenant with his people (at Sinai) just before providing a land for them, he is attempting to reshape his people into a nation very much unlike their neighbors.

Regarding Israelite society, sociological research reveals that early on, Israel's identity was classified by tribes, clans, and households (extended families). In short, Israel had a tribal and kinship structure. Economic, judicial, religious, and even military aspects of life were oriented around this social formation. By contrast, Canaanites had a kind of feudal system with a powerful elite at the top and peasants at the bottom.

Regarding the land, many extended families were landowning households. These family units had considerable social freedom; Israelite society was "socially decentralized and non-hierarchical" until the time of Solomon onward. By contrast, Canaanite kings owned all the land. Peasants had to work the land as tenants and pay taxes.¹ Again we have dramatic improvements in Israelite law in contrast to the Canaanites.

At Sinai, the Creator bound himself to Israel in a loving covenant, the Mosaic law, which extends from Exodus 20 to Numbers 10 and is recapitulated in Deuteronomy (the "second law") for the next generation of Israelites about to enter Canaan. Included in this covenant are apparently odd and arbitrary Old Testament laws. The atheist Bertrand Russell wondered about the command not to boil a kid goat in the milk of its mother (Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21); this demand seems arbitrary to our ears, he claimed, because it was rooted in some ancient ritual.² Like Russell, when we read commands regarding clothing laws, planting laws, food laws, laws prohibiting tattoos or ruining the corners of a beard, we may ask ourselves, "Why in the world . . . ? What's the point?" Apart from their purpose for national Israel in the Old Testament, what good are they for us today? Do they have any relevance for us? Even though Christians aren't under the Mosaic covenant "but



under grace” (Rom. 6:14), what relationship does the Mosaic covenant have to those of us who live in the new covenant era initiated by Christ?

Keep in mind this statement that is worthy of full acceptance: the law of Moses is not eternal and unchanging. Despite what the New Atheists assume, Old Testament sages and seers themselves announced that the law of Moses was intentionally temporary. Yes, we see God saying things like “you shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it” (Deut. 4:2), but even here it is in the context of imageless worship (vv. 15–18).³ We also see adaptation within the law itself, such as Zelophehad’s daughters requesting an upgraded legislation to address their inheritance question (Num. 27:1–11). Furthermore, Old Testament saints awaited a new covenant (Jer. 31; Ezek. 36). Within the law itself, we’re told that a time would come when God would circumcise the hearts of his people (Deut. 30:1–6). So let’s not think that we’re talking about the universal application of all Old Testament laws for post-Old Testament times.

Israel’s History, God’s Activity

The nineteenth-century British journalist William Ewer wrote, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” Well, grace is an amazing—and in some ways an odd—thing. Why did God select the nation of Israel and not another? Not because it possessed some right or had earned God’s favor to be chosen. Israel owed its very existence to the saving activity of God in history. Israel’s status as a theocracy (under “God’s rule”) was a privilege—and a responsibility—rooted in the grace of God.

The law of Moses didn’t stand on its own as a mere ancient law code. It is unique in that it is interwoven into a dynamic historical narrative of a covenant-making God’s activity through Israel from its beginnings: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exod. 20:2–3). God’s act of gracious deliverance—along with his interaction with human beings in history—sets the context for God’s giving the Mosaic law. In fact, the events in Israel’s story often illustrate and clarify matters raised in the Mosaic law.

So we’ll misunderstand these Mosaic matters if we think Israel’s obligations consisted only in eating kosher foods, remaining ritually clean by staying away from corpses and carcasses, and going to the health inspector-priest to have skin diseases, scabs, and house mold examined. For one thing, God desired that Israel *love* him and *cling to* him (Deut. 6:5; 10:20), which isn’t exactly reducible to keeping laws! Also, God’s *actions* in history shaped his people’s *identity* as God’s covenant people; the deliverance from Egypt in turn was to shape the nation’s inner motivation out of *gratitude*. For example, because God graciously rescued his people from Egypt, Israel was to remember to treat with compassion the strangers and less fortunate in their midst. His people were not to forget that they themselves were once slaves in a foreign land (Lev. 25:38, 42, 55; Deut. 15:15).

We’ve all met parents who think their kids can do no wrong. It’s frustrating when you’re the one trying to coach such kids in sports or teach them in a classroom. Some critics trump up this same charge against God—that he’s treating Israel with a blind favoritism. Not so! In fact, God promised Israel that she would—and *did*—receive the same judgments God brought on morally corrupt nations surrounding her (Deut. 28:15–68; Josh. 23:14–16). God regularly reminded Israel that it



wasn't her righteousness but rather God's grace that brought about her chosen status (Deut. 9:4–5); in response, they were to treat the poor and vulnerable with compassion and to be a blessing to the surrounding nations.

This picture expresses what one scholar calls the grace-gratitude ideal: “This is what God has done *for you*. Therefore, out of *gratitude* you should *do the same* for others.”⁴ The very context for the law was grace. Having “no other gods” (along with the other nine commandments) is preceded by the reminder that God had delivered Israel out of bondage (Exod. 20:2). Being God's graciously chosen people meant Israel's obligation to live wisely before the nations (Deut. 4:6–7).

Some atheist philosophers have objected to the idea of a “chosen people”—that this, by itself, is inherently immoral. Louise Antony asks, “What part of ‘chosen people’ do you not understand?”⁵ Actually, she hasn't understood it all that well! Not only does God threaten Israel with the same judgments he brings on other nations, but he also reminds Israel that he is at work in the nations of the world: “Are you not as the sons of Ethiopia to Me, O sons of Israel? . . . Have I not brought up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (Amos 9:7). When we encounter Melchizedek, Abimelech, Job, Rahab, Ruth, and other non-Israelites in the Old Testament, we are reminded of Paul's words—that a rescuing and redeeming God isn't far from each one of us (Acts 17:27), whether before or after Christ. And God's choosing Israel was not an end in itself but a means of blessing all the nations.

“One Nation under God”

The Manifest Destiny idea has shaped much of American life, though the term came into use in the 1840s to validate the United States' expansion into Texas, Mexico, and Oregon. Early in America's history, many Protestants who came to America believed that they were extending the Reformation; God's special hand of blessing was upon them as they hoped to realize the postmillennial dream: bringing God's kingdom to earth. The governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop (1588–1649), saw the New England colony as “a City upon a Hill” with “the eyes of all people . . . upon us.”⁶ The problem here was that the early colonists' vision was blurred; they didn't distinguish between church and state. They assumed that they were the new people of God embarking on a new exodus—an errand in the wilderness—to do theocracy the right way.

Today, many American Christians seem to mix up church and state. They believe the community of genuine believers in America is the people of God—both in heaven and on earth. But the nation of America isn't the people of God; we don't live in a theocracy. The sooner Christians realize this, the sooner the church can make a deeper impact as salt and light in society.

Things were different at Mount Sinai. A true theocracy was being created, the only one that would ever exist. Church and state were united.⁷ Some readers may be thinking, “But Muslims have their theocracies too!” I'm not going to take the time here to argue for the Old Testament's unique authority as God's special revelation to Israel as opposed to, say, the Qur'an.⁸ I'm just trying to help make better sense of difficulties found within the Old Testament.

Under the Mosaic covenant, national Israel uniquely existed as a theocracy, and even this arrangement wasn't intended to be ideal and permanent. This environment would help prepare the



cultural and theological context for God's revelation of Jesus of Nazareth "when the fullness of the time came" (Gal. 4:4). The ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit would lead to the creation of a new, interethnic community—the true Israel as the new royal priesthood and holy nation (1 Peter 2:9). The Old Testament theocracy gave way to a new covenant community from every nation and language—the church (see Matt. 8:11–12; 21:43). The fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 marked the finality of this transition, signaling the demise of national/ ethnic Israel as the people of God.⁹

Again, Old Testament Israel was the one and only genuine theocracy ever to exist, and it was temporary at that. Furthermore, national Israel was established by God to help set the religious, cultural, and historical context for the saving work of Jesus the Messiah later in history. The ultimate goal is nothing less than God's salvation being brought to all the nations (Gen. 12:3) and seeing his righteous rule finally established (2 Pet. 3:13).

Holiness in All of Life

The Israelites seemed to have laws covering everything—food laws, clothing laws, planting laws, civil laws, laws regarding marriage and sexual relations. These weren't intended to be exhaustive. Rather, they were to be viewed first as visible reminders to live as God's holy people in every area of life. There wasn't any division between the sacred and the secular, between the holy and the profane. God was concerned about holiness in all things—the major and the minor, the significant and the mundane. In such legislation, Israel was being reminded that she was different, a holy people set apart to serve God.¹⁰

Holiness wasn't just for official priests; it was for the entire people of Israel. In fact, they were called "a kingdom of priests" and "a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6). Since God is holy or set apart, his people were to be so as well (Lev. 11:44). The Israelites were to be "marked off," just as the Sabbath day was "marked off" or "set apart as holy" to the Lord (Gen. 2:3). We could rephrase the command "be holy, for I the Lord am holy" (Lev. 19:2) this way: "You shall be my people and mine alone, for I am your God and yours alone."¹¹ This relationship can be compared to the serious marriage vows we talked about earlier. Being God's people meant living lives dedicated to God in every aspect of life.

This holiness wasn't religious pretense—a phoniness that looked intact and decent on the outside but was cracked and rotting within. When God prescribed rituals, he wanted them to represent humility of heart and love for God and neighbor (Ps. 51:15–19). God *hated* rites like "festivals . . . solemn assemblies . . . burnt offerings and . . . grain offerings" when God's people ignored "justice" and "righteousness" (Amos 5:21–24). Eating kosher foods and paying careful attention to rituals didn't matter if the worship of God and the treatment of others weren't kosher.¹²

Food, clothing, and planting laws weren't nitpicky commands God gave to oppress Israel. The prophets reminded her that God was primarily concerned about justice, mercy, and walking humbly before God (Deut. 10:12; Mic. 6:8). This underlying *moral* concern, however, didn't cancel out *ritual* prescriptions—with their rich theological meaning—even much later in Israel's history after the Babylonian exile.¹³



The Christian (and we could throw in the non-Christian too) should learn the lesson God wanted to teach ancient Israel: living under God's reign should affect all of life. God's presence permeates and saturates our world. Heaven and earth are full of his glory (Ps. 19:1–2; Isa. 6:3). God isn't cordoned off to some private, religious realm. God is—either by direct control or divine permission so as not to violate human freedom—sovereignly at work in all the rhythms of creation and workings of human history. He's weaving together a tapestry to bring all things to their climax in Christ. As the hymn writer put it, God “speaks to me everywhere.”¹⁴

Clean and Unclean

We've heard the line “cleanliness is next to godliness.” In Old Testament times, this was closer to the truth than what we may think today. What does all this language of “cleanness” and “uncleanness” or “purity” and “impurity” mean? Why the ablutions for the pollutions? Why the need for purification? While we Westerners may think all of this strange, many other cultures—tribal, Islamic, Hindu—can more readily relate to such a picture. We'll be helped by thinking in terms of analogies and symbolism—not in terms of arguments—in our effort to better understand purity laws and the notions of clean and unclean.

Cleanness and uncleanness are symbols or pictures, and the Hebrew idea of life and death is behind these pictures. For the Hebrew, life wasn't mere biological existence. Humans could be biologically alive yet living in the realm of death—spiritual, moral, psychological/emotional ruin and alienation (e.g., Prov. 7:23–27). Uncleanness symbolizes loss of life.

Although many English translations use terms such as *(un)cleanness* or *(im)purity*, we shouldn't think these refer to health and hygiene. That isn't the case. Perhaps the term *taboo*—which suggests something nonmoral and perhaps mysterious that is off-limits regarding food, time, death, or sex—might capture this idea more effectively. A priest needed to be physically whole—without defect—so that the sanctuary of God might not become common. This doesn't mean that a physical defect is sinful or wrong; being polluted isn't identical to being immoral (although immorality brings pollution or is taboo). After all, animals that are taboo (unclean) are still part of God's good creation. And when unclean, Israelites weren't prohibited from worshiping God or even celebrating feasts—only from entering the sanctuary.¹⁵

Furthermore, sex is a good gift from God and not sinful (within marriage), yet purification was necessary after sex so as to show the distinction between God and human beings. (Keep in mind that the various ancient Near Eastern gods engaged in all kinds of sexual activity, unlike the biblical God.)¹⁶

Life, on the other hand, means being rightly connected to God and to the community—and properly functioning, whole, or well-ordered within (peace = *shalom*). As we'll see, carnivorous animals, whether predators or scavengers, are connected with death and are therefore unclean. Ritual uncleanness in Israel was inevitable and frequent but not in itself sinful.¹⁷ Yet the ultimate concern behind cleanness, uncleanness, and holiness is the human heart—the very point Jesus made in Mark 7:14–23. And even though sin goes beyond ceremonial matters, it still defiles or pollutes us. Sin creates *moral* impurity or uncleanness before God. In the Old Testament, *ethical* concerns (sin) can't be separated from matters of *purity*.¹⁸ Murder, for example, symbolically defiles



or pollutes the land (Num. 35:33–34), and so it must be “cleansed.” The same can be said about the language of abomination; it has the same kind of overlap as uncleanness. Sometimes it refers to *moral impurity*, other times *ceremonial impurity*—and these categories aren’t always neatly distinguished in the Old Testament. To sum up, the law refers to two kinds of (im)purity: (1) *ritual impurity* (the result of contact with natural processes of birth, death, and sexual relations) and (2) *moral impurity* (through three serious sins in particular—idolatry, incest, and murder).¹⁹

Again, cleanness was ultimately a heart issue.²⁰ The nearer one came to God, the cleaner one had to be. Approaching God was serious business, and doing so called for self-scrutiny and preparation. The pursuit of cleanness was a kind of spiritual “dressing down”—an inner unveiling or internal examination of where one stood in relation to God.

Now, cleanness and uncleanness are opposite each other (Lev. 10:10), and Israelites could move in and out of these (temporary) states. In the course of life, they would become vulnerable to uncleanness. For example, an Israelite could touch a carcass or have a child and become unclean but then purify herself or offer a sacrifice and become clean again.

Cleanness and uncleanness are symbolic of life and death, respectively. Humans move between these two relative or temporary states (because of childbirth, male and female “issues,” contact with death, sinful acts); these states represent being with or without life. The stable status of holiness, on the other hand, reflects closeness to life found in God, and an Israelite had to be “clean” (and closer to life) in order to approach the tabernacle’s outer court; the high priest had to be clean and was specially set apart (“holy”) to enter the Holy of Holies just once a year. Holy articles such as the ark of the covenant and the Holy of Holies remained holy and did not become unclean—even if the sanctuary might be cleansed under unusual circumstances (for example, 2 Chron. 28:19). More clearly in the New Testament, Jesus—“the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14)—touched lepers and a hemorrhaging woman but remained unpolluted. The relationship between life and death, holiness, and cleanness/uncleanness is illustrated in the figure below:²¹



Holiness came in degrees of set-apartness (e.g., the people, Levites, high priest). The closer an Israelite drew to a holy God (moving from the tabernacle’s/temple’s outer court to the Holy Place to the Holy of Holies), the more requirements he had to follow and precautions he had to take. At their consecration, high priests had special garments, washings, anointings with oil, and ceremonies that marked them as set apart. Nazirites (Num. 6) took sacred vows in consecration to God; this was shown by avoiding alcohol, haircuts, and contact with dead things. If someone from a priestly line couldn’t give evidence of his ancestry, he was considered unclean (Ezra 2:62)—unfit for closely approaching God. There was a hierarchy of holiness in Israel.

Not Getting Mixed Up with Others

Attentive parents will regularly tell their kids to avoid getting mixed up with the wrong crowd. Bad company corrupts good character (1 Cor. 15:33; cf. Ps. 1:1–2). Likewise, God gave the Israelites



certain actions to carry out as a way of *symbolically* telling them not to get mixed in with the false ways of the nations. Israel “wore” certain badges of holy distinction that separated them from morally and theologically corrupted nations surrounding them; they were not to get “mixed in” with those nations’ mind-set and behavior.²² Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:9–11 prohibit mixed breeding and other attempts at mixing: no cross-breeding of cattle; no planting of different crops (“two kinds of seed”) in the same field (though this may refer to a Canaanite magical practice of the “wedding” of different seeds to conjure up fertile crops); no clothing with mixed fibers such as wool and linen (no polyesters!); and no plowing with both ox *and* donkey.²³

The law also refers to improper *sexual* mixing as with adultery, incest, bestiality, and homosexuality, since these were viewed as *crossing boundaries* (Lev. 18:6–23).²⁴ Likewise, because God created male and female (Gen. 1:26–27), wearing the clothes of a person from the opposite sex (by which divinely ordained sexual distinctions could be blurred or spheres crossed) was prohibited (Deut. 22:5). As we’ll see, the same applied to clean and unclean animals. These antimixing commands attempted to portray a sense of wholeness, completeness, and integrity. This is why the priest and the animal sacrifice weren’t allowed to have any physical deformity (Lev. 21:18–24; 22:18–26).

A number of scholars reasonably claim that God was reminding Israel of her own distinctive, holy calling even in the very foods Israel was to eat. Animals that “crossed” or in a sense “transgressed” the individual and distinctive spheres of air, water, or land were considered unclean. Gordon Wenham puts it this way: “In creation God separated between light and darkness, waters and waters. This ban on all mixtures, especially mixed breeding, shows man following in God’s steps. He must separate what God created separate.”²⁵

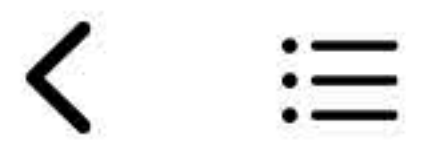
Food laws—interwoven with many other Mosaic commands regarding purity—symbolized the boundaries God’s people were to keep before them:

- The sanctuary (tabernacle/temple): God’s visible presence was manifested there; this was his “habitation.” God gave laws to remind his people of their own set-apartness from all creation and how God was to be approached (e.g., priests as well as sacrificed animals had to be without defect or blemish).
- The land of Israel: The land of Israel was set in the midst of pagan nations with false gods, and thus there were certain commands that marked off the Israelites from other nations.

So Israel’s land, Israel’s sacrifices, and Israel’s food all had social and theological significance. Israel’s various boundaries were to remind her of her relationship to God and to the nations around her. Just as God was set apart from human beings, Israel was to be set apart in its behavior and theology from the surrounding nations. Just as the tabernacle represented sacred space within Israel, so the land of Israel itself represented a set-apartness in contrast to the nations around it.²⁶

I’ve tried to set the stage for discussing food and other purity laws in more detail. I’ll do so in the next chapter.

Further Reading



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8

The Bible's Ubiquitous Weirdness?

*Kosher Foods, Kooky Laws? (II)***Kosher Laws**

The Hebrew word *kashrut* means to be proper or correct. Observant Jews will be alert to Kosher food labels with the letters *kshr* (in the Hebrew root form) on them. Israelites were to avoid foods such as pork, shrimp, and squid. Why were such foods unclean (not kosher)?

The listing of clean and unclean animals is found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. An interesting feature to these lists is that certain animals were unclean but still could be handled (for example, camels used for transportation). The issue arose when there was death. Unclean animal carcasses rendered a person impure, not necessarily touching the animals when they were alive.

Scholars have suggested various reasons for the distinction between clean and unclean. We'll look at a couple of unsatisfactory suggestions before zeroing in on a more likely solution.

- **Health/hygiene:** *Argument:* Israelites were to avoid eating vultures because these creatures eat roadkill and carnivores' "leftovers." And who knows what kinds of diseases these birds carry? We know that pigs can transmit diseases such as trichinosis, while the hare and coney/rock badger commonly carry tularemia. Shrimp shouldn't be eaten because they raise your cholesterol level! *Problem:* The health idea just isn't the concern in Leviticus 11 or elsewhere in the Old Testament. And why aren't poisonous *plants* considered unclean? To top it off, why did Jesus declare all these foods clean if health was really the issue in the kosher foods section of the Old Testament?¹
- **Association with non-Israelite religions:** *Argument:* Animals were unclean because they were associated with non-Israelite religion in the ancient Near East. *Problem:* If that's the case, the bull should have been an abomination; after all, this animal was central to Canaanite and Egyptian religion. Yet the bull was the most valuable of Israel's sacrificial animals. As it turns out, the Canaanites sacrificed the same sorts of animals in their religious rituals as did the Israelites! (Hittites did sacrifice pigs, however.) On top of all this, ancient Near Easterners generally considered pigs detestable and typically avoided both eating them and sacrificing them in their religious rites. While Israel was to differentiate itself from neighboring nations in many aspects, animal sacrifice wasn't one of them.²

These two suggestions, therefore—health and religion—aren't good solutions. A couple of related angles will help us get at an answer: creation (Gen. 1) and the fall, death, and abnormality (Gen. 3).



Angle 1: Creation

Genesis 1 divides animals into three spheres: animals that walk on the land, animals that swim in the water, animals that fly in the air. Leviticus 11 lists as unclean certain animals that are connected to land (vv. 2–8), water (vv. 9–12), and air (vv. 13–25). As we’ve seen, these animals symbolize a mixing or blurring of categories. In contrast, the clean animal has all the defining features of its class given at creation. So animals that “transgressed” boundaries or overlapped spheres were to be avoided as unclean.

- Water: To be clean, aquatic animals must have scales *and* fins (Lev. 11:10; Deut. 14:10); so eels or shellfish, which don’t fit this category, are unclean and thus prohibited.
- Land: Clean animals are four-footed ones that hop, walk, or jump. A clear indication of a land animal’s operating according to its sphere is that it *both* (1) has split hoofs and (2) is a cud-chewer. These two features make obvious that an animal belongs to the land sphere (e.g., sheep and goat). Camels, hares, coneys (which chew the cud but don’t have divided hoofs), and pigs (which have divided hoofs but don’t chew the cud) are borderline cases; so they’re excluded as appropriate land animals to eat.
- Air: Birds have two wings for flying. Birds like pelicans and gulls inhabit both water and sky, which makes them unclean. Insects that fly but have *many* legs are unclean; they operate in two spheres—land and air. However, insects with four feet—two of which are jointed for hopping on the ground—are considered clean (Deut. 11:21–23). These insects—the locust, katydid, cricket, and grasshopper—are like birds of the air, which hop on the ground with two legs. Therefore they’re clean.

Unclean animals symbolized what Israel was to avoid—mixing in with the unclean beliefs and practices of the surrounding nations. Israel was to be like the clean animals—distinct, in their own category, and not having mixed features. After all, the Israelites were God’s set-apart people who were to reject the religion and practices of surrounding nations.³

But wasn’t everything that God created “very good” (Gen. 1:31)? If so, doesn’t this mean that no animal is inherently unclean or inferior? Yes, Jesus affirms this in Mark 7:19 (all foods are clean), and it is implied in Acts 10:10–16 (Peter’s vision). However, as the people of God, the Israelites were reminded that holiness requires persons to conform to their class as God’s set-apart people. So what the Israelites did in their everyday lives—even down to their eating habits—was to signal that they were God’s chosen people who were to live lives distinct from the surrounding nations. Every meal was to remind them of their redemption. Their diet, which was limited to certain meats, imitated the action of God, *who limited himself to Israel from among the nations*, choosing them as the means of blessing the world.⁴

So no religious overlap, blurring distinctions, or compromise could exist between Israel and its neighbors. Israel was called to integrity and purity of life, to avoid what would restrict or inhibit drawing near to God. Holiness involved conformity to God’s order of things. Just as clean animals belonged to their distinct sphere without compromise, so God’s holy people were to belong to their distinct sphere; they weren’t to mix their religion with surrounding pagan nations or inter-

marry with those who rejected the God of Israel (cf. Ezra 9:1–4; Neh. 13:23–30). Holiness wasn’t merely a matter of eating and drinking but a life devoted to God in every area. The New Testament says the same thing: while all foods are ultimately clean (Mark 7:19), our eating and drinking matter to God, who is Lord of all (1 Cor. 10:31). Yet food matters shouldn’t disrupt the church’s joy and peace in the Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

Angle 2: The Fall, Death, and Abnormality

Not only do swarming and slithering creatures cut across the three spheres of classification and are thus unclean, but swarming and slithering animals in any sphere (eels, snakes, flying insects) were reminiscent of the fall in Genesis 3 and of the cursed slithering serpent. We can look at clean and unclean foods from another angle—that of curse and death. This connection with the fall is reinforced by the repetition of God’s command in Genesis 2–3, “you may eat” (2:16; 3:2) or “you shall not eat” (2:17; 3:1, 3), in Leviticus 11 (vv. 2, 3, 9, 11, 21, 22).

Furthermore, the kinds of animals that were permitted and forbidden in the Israelites’ diet were linked to the kind of people God wanted them to be. They weren’t to be predators in their human relationships. Just as discharged blood and semen symbolized death and therefore uncleanness, so did predatory animals: “do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts” (Exod. 22:31 NIV).

A further aspect to cleanness and uncleanness seems to be an animal’s appearance. An animal with either an odd-looking or abnormal appearance/ feature or one that is weak and defenseless falls into the unclean category as well.

While specific kinds of food, clothing, planting, and sexual relations in their respective spheres serve as a picture of Israel’s set-apartness from the nations, the distinction between clean and unclean animals in particular symbolizes how the Israelites were to act in relationship to their neighbors as well as to God. In the language of Leviticus, animals symbolize what God required from his people. For example, note the parallels between the kinds of animals offered in sacrifices in Leviticus 1, 3, and 23 (“without blemish,” which resulted in a “pleasing aroma to the Lord”) and the priest who is to be “without defect/ blemish” (see Lev. 21:18–23). The parallel language between the unblemished priest and the unblemished sacrificial animal is striking (note the italicized words, emphasis mine):

Unblemished Priest (Lev. 21:18–20, 23)	Unblemished Animal (Lev. 22:18–22, 24)
For no one [of Aaron’s priestly line] who has a defect shall approach: a blind man, or a lame man, or he who has a disfigured face, or any deformed limb, or a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, or a hunchback or a dwarf, or one who has a defect in his eye or eczema or scabs or <i>crushed testicles</i> <i>He shall not go in to the veil or come near the altar because he has a defect, so that he will not profane My sanctuaries. For I am the Lord who sanctifies them.</i>	[When anyone] presents his offering . . . it must be a male without defect. . . . Whatever has a defect, you shall not offer. . . . It must be perfect to be accepted; there shall be no defect in it. Those that are blind or <i>fractured or maimed or having a running sore</i> or eczema or scabs, you shall not offer to the Lord. . . . Also anything with its <i>testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut</i> , you shall not offer to the Lord, or sacrifice in your land.



Getting more specific, Mary Douglas shows the connection between the kinds of animals that are permitted/forbidden to be eaten and the kind of people God wants Israel to be in its relationships.⁵ The theme of (un)cleanness in Leviticus and Deuteronomy symbolizes creation's orderliness with everything in its own sphere. (So unclean animals represent a lack of wholeness or integrity in not belonging to their own sphere.) Yet something more is going on: animals that are unclean appear to be either (1) predatory animals or (2) vulnerable animals (defective in appearance or characteristics). This has a parallel to human relationships.

In regard to the predatory aspect, animals of the air (owls, gulls, hawks, and carrion-eaters such as vultures) are forbidden in Israel's diet because they themselves have consumed blood; they're predatory. Remember the prohibition against eating blood in Genesis 9:4, suggesting respect for life, which is in the blood: "the life of all flesh is its blood" (Lev. 17:14).

As for land animals, quadruped plant-eaters—rather than carnivores—may be eaten (once their blood has been drained). The fact that they (1) chew the cud and (2) have split hoofs (whether domestic or wild) are clear indications that they never eat blood and thus are not predatory (Lev. 11:3). The borderline cases—the pig, the camel, the hare, and the coney—are forbidden because they fit one but not both criteria. So land animals that are *predators* must be avoided because of their contact with blood. In a symbolic way, they "break the law."⁶

Some scholars point out another symbolic feature. Besides unclean animals that represent predation, there are others that represent *victims* of predation. For instance, prohibited aquatic animals (without scales and fins) symbolically lack something they "need"; this is a picture of vulnerability. The distinction between clean and unclean animals also serves as a picture of justice and injustice in personal relationships. Let me quote Douglas at length:

The forbidden animal species exemplify the predators, on the one hand, that is those who eat blood, and on the other, the sufferers from injustice. Consider the list, especially the swarming insects, the chameleon with its lumpy face, the high humped tortoise and beetle, and the ants labouring under their huge loads. Think of the blindness of worms and bats, the vulnerability of fish without scales. Think of their human parallels, the labourers, the beggars, the orphans, and the defenceless widows. Not themselves but the behavior that reduces them to this state is an abomination. No wonder the Lord made the crawling things and found them good (Gen. 1:31). It is not in the grand style of Leviticus to take time off from cosmic themes to teach that these pathetic creatures are to be shunned because their bodies are disgusting, vile, bad, any more than it is consistent with its theme of justice to teach that the poor are to be shunned. Shunning is not the issue. Predation is wrong, eating is a form of predation, and the poor are not to be a prey.⁷

What's most clear in all of this is that holiness and predatory behavior don't mix. Holiness represents respect for human life, and the eating of blood (symbolizing violent death) represents predatory activity. Clean animals don't represent virtues in their own bodies, just as unclean animals' bodies don't represent vices. They just follow the "rule" of avoiding blood.⁸ If scholars who claim that certain unclean animals symbolize vulnerability and defenselessness are correct, then this representation of the oppressed—the alien, the widow, the orphan (Deut. 14:29; 16:11; cf. Isa. 1:17)—would serve as a reminder that they ought to be respected.



Israel's entire way of life—down to the very food they ate (or didn't eat)—mattered to God. Their diet served as a reminder of the holy and the unholy: Israelites were to avoid the unholy activity of preying upon the vulnerable in society.

Dishonorable Discharges

Why do many levitical laws emphasize semen and blood? Leviticus 15 speaks of the emission of semen or the discharging of menstrual blood, both of which lead to impurity and the need for washing/purification. The reason? The life-death symbolism behind cleanness-uncleanness informs us that these discharges represented what was “outside” the wholeness of the human body, just as unclean foods entering the body would symbolically pollute or defile.

Vaginal blood and semen are powerful symbols of life, but their loss symbolizes death. To lose one of these life fluids represented moving in the direction of death.⁹ Some scholars suggest that Exodus 23:19 prohibited cooking a kid goat in its mother's milk because this was a Canaanite fertility ritual. Others suggest that this is a case of clashing symbols. That is, life (mother's milk) and death (cooking a baby goat) collide in this scenario. Another such clash is found in Leviticus 22:28: “Do not slaughter a cow or a sheep and its young on the same day” (NIV). Likewise, life and death are symbolically at odds when semen or menstrual blood is lost from the body. This admixture of life and death represents a loss of wholeness.¹⁰

The symbolism doesn't stop here. Israel was surrounded by nations that had fertility cults. To have sex with a prostitute in a temple meant spiritually connecting with a particular deity. By contrast, Leviticus 15 presents something of an “emission control system”! The message to Israel was that sex has its proper place. God isn't prudish about sex. God is the author of mutually satisfying sex between husband and wife (Gen. 2:24; Prov. 5:15–19; Song of Songs). Yet, in contrast to her neighbors, Israel needed to take seriously restraint and discipline in sexual activity. Although sex brought temporary impurity, Israel was reminded that it was prohibited in the sanctuary as part of a religious ritual—unlike the sexual rituals in Canaanite religion. Again, sex within monogamous marriage is good, but adultery shouldn't be glorified by putting a religious label on it. To differentiate Israel from her neighbors, God provided certain “barriers” to keep sex in its proper place rather than degrading it—no matter how pious Israel's neighbor's made adultery appear.¹¹

In contrast to the surrounding nations, wives in Israel weren't possessions to be used for sexual pleasure. Men had certain restrictions regarding when they could have sex with their wives, which was to help give women a greater measure of independence. As Richard Hess points out, such protective laws have no parallels in the ancient Near East.¹²

The Holiness Gap: Purity Laws and the Need for Grace

Being God's chosen nation was a privilege. However, a heavy burden came with it. As the peasant Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* tells God, “I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?” Now rewind to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Many of the earliest Christians (who were Jewish) thought that one must become a good Jew in order to become a good Christian. Yes, Jesus was sufficient for salvation—sort of. But more was needed, some argued—namely, Jewishness! Peter replied to this claim: “Now therefore why do you put



God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (v. 10).

Serious-minded Old Testament Jews were regularly reminded of the gap between God and themselves. To approach God was no light thing, and throughout an Israelite’s daily life were many reminders of defilement, impurity, and barriers in worshiping God. Attentive Israelites routinely experienced a “holiness gap” that existed between them and God.¹³ Being placed in such a position could prompt an Israelite to seek God’s grace and purification on his behalf.

Animal sacrifices were a small picture of this. The worshipers/priests would place their hands on the animal. This act symbolized that an animal was being put to death in the place of humans (Lev. 4:15; 8:14, 18, 22). Sacrifice served as a reminder of human sin and unholiness and the great need for outside assistance—that is, divine grace.

Richard Hess offers an illuminating perspective on sacrificial laws and the sequence of sacrifices in Leviticus. First is the *purification* (from sin) offering, then the *burnt* offering (indicating total dedication to God), and then the *fellowship* (or ordination) offering (chaps. 8–9, 16). This helps us better understand the nature of Christian discipleship in the New Testament epistles: first comes confession of sin, then dedication to God, and then fellowship with God. Though Christ fulfills these sacrifices (as Hebrews makes clear), they illustrate nicely what is involved in Christian discipleship.¹⁴

Galatians 3:24–25 mentions the law as a tutor to lead us to Christ. In other words, the law pointed *forward* toward the ultimate fulfillment of Israel’s sacrifices, priesthood, and holy days. And as we’ve seen, such things pointed *backward* to Abraham, who turns out to be a picture of the need for grace apart from law keeping. Genesis 15:6 affirms that Abraham trusted God and was counted righteous by God because of his faith. Notice: this happened even before he was circumcised and before the Mosaic law was given. Living by faith, even without the law, enabled one to keep the heart of it (cf. Gen. 26:5).¹⁵ The law—with all its purity requirements and sacrifices—actually revealed human inadequacy and thus the need for humans to look beyond their own resources to God’s gracious assistance.

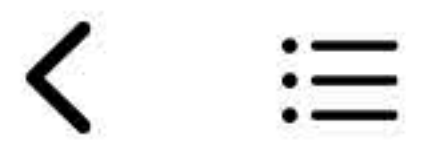
However one navigates through some of these Old Testament purity laws, the undergirding rationale behind these laws is Israel’s call to live holy lives in everything. That’s why the theme of holiness is explicitly mentioned in all the passages in which the prohibited food lists are given (Exod. 22:30–31; Lev. 11:44–45; 20:25–26; Deut. 14:4–21).

Upon reflection, the New Atheists’ caricatures of the Mosaic law shouldn’t be taken so seriously. We need patience to understand what’s going on with the Old Testament’s levitical laws, and we shouldn’t see the law as the ideal standard for all humanity. However, we’ll continue to see how it shows a greater moral sensitivity and a marked improvement over other ancient Near Eastern law codes.

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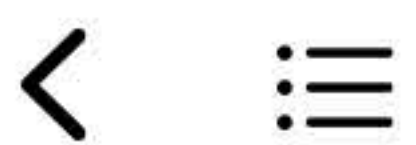


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9

Barbarisms, Crude Laws, and Other Imaginary Crimes?

Punishments and Other Harsh Realities in Perspective

In many ways, life in the ancient Near East was much like the “state of nature” described by philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) in his *Leviathan*: “nasty, brutish, and short.” It was no picnic, to be sure, and many of the ancient Near Eastern laws reflected this harsh, morally underdeveloped existence.

We’ve taken pains to show that the Old Testament laws weren’t given in a vacuum. Though they presented a dramatic moral improvement, they also reflected the ancient Near Eastern social context. The punishments in the Mosaic law reveal aspects of that context. So when the New Atheists refer to barbarisms, crude laws, and other imaginary crimes found in the Old Testament, they no doubt have these kinds of passages in mind:

If there is anyone who curses his father or his mother, he shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother, his bloodguiltiness is upon him. (Lev. 20:9)

Now the son of an Israelite woman, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the sons of Israel; and the Israelite woman’s son and a man of Israel struggled with each other in the camp. The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name and cursed. So they brought him to Moses. . . . They put him in custody so that the command of the Lord might be made clear to them. Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Bring the one who has cursed outside the camp, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head; then let all the congregation stone him.” (Lev. 24:10–14)

Now while the sons of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering wood on the sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation; and they put him in custody because it had not been declared what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, “The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” So all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. (Num. 15:32–36)

If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. They shall say to the elders of his city, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear of it and fear. (Deut. 21:18–21)



The law of Moses seems so severe with all this death-penalty and harsh-punishment talk! Some Westerners utterly disapprove of even modest corporal punishment. In fact, it's illegal in places like Sweden and other Nordic countries. So when we come to some Old Testament laws, the punishments seem outrageous. Critics claim that stoning people is primitive and barbaric and that the death penalty itself is cruel and unusual punishment. Now I'm not advocating stoning people as a punishment, nor am I advocating a death penalty for those who reject the Bible. But we'll try to put some of this harsh-sounding legislation into perspective.

Ancient Near Eastern Law Codes and the Mosaic Law

We've repeated the theme that the Mosaic law was given to Israel in a morally inferior ancient Near Eastern context. Other ancient Near Eastern law codes existed in the second millennium BC and were known as "cuneiform" law. Cuneiform (kyoo-*nee*-i-form) refers to the wedge-shaped characters or letters inscribed on ancient Near Eastern clay tablets, typically with a reed stylus. Included in this list are the laws of Ur-Nammu (c. 2100 BC, during the Third Dynasty of Ur); the laws of Lipit-Ishtar (c. 1925 BC), who ruled the Sumerian city of Isin; the (Akkadian) laws of Eshnunna (c. 1800 BC), a city one hundred miles north of Babylon; the Babylonian laws of Hammurabi (1750 BC); and the Hittite laws (1650–1200 BC) of Asia Minor (Turkey).¹

We shouldn't be surprised that there are parallels and overlap between various ancient Near Eastern laws and the Mosaic law. In fact, various sayings and maxims in the book of Proverbs sound a lot like adaptations or borrowings from the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope*. Biblical writers might quote a work of poetry—like the Book of Jashar (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18)—or they might consult official documents, as the chronicler does. Along these lines, we could view Moses as something of an editor of the Pentateuch who appropriates oral traditions and writings related to creation and Israel's patriarchal history. Later in the New Testament, Luke 1:1–4 reveals an orderly research project investigating the Jesus traditions that had accumulated in order to compile a trustworthy biography of Jesus. These human endeavors, writing styles, literary genres, and personalities are part of the Spirit-inspired enscripturation process. Some have compared the "making" of the Scriptures to the doctrine of the incarnation. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the divine and the human are brought together. Likewise, simply because a writer's personality or style or various processes are involved or because "outside" material was borrowed doesn't mean that God's inspiring Spirit wasn't involved in Scripture formation.

Again, various parallels and similarities exist between ancient Near Eastern laws and the Mosaic law (and more specifically, the covenant code of Exodus 20:21–23:33)—whether this be capital punishment for murder or legislation regarding a goring ox. And, yes, there were certain humanizing improvements in various ancient Near Eastern codes over time—for example, a softening of legislation from the Old Hittite laws (1650–1500 BC) to the New Hittite laws (1500–1180 BC). But at key points, whopping differences exist between the Mosaic law and other ancient Near Eastern codes. The Sinai legislation presents genuinely remarkable, previously unheard-of legal and moral advances. Not surprisingly, critics like the New Atheists focus on the negative while overlooking dramatic improvements. Why bother with nuance when you can score rhetorical points about the backward ways of the ancient Near East! Throughout the rest of part 2, we'll highlight these significant differences.



As we delve more deeply, we'll continue to affirm two things: (1) certain Old Testament laws and punishments were inferior to creational ideals (Gen. 1–2); (2) the Mosaic law is not permanent, universal, and the standard for all nations. So we should evaluate the severity of harsh laws and punishments in their ancient Near Eastern context instead of in light of Western culture. Indeed, to the minds of the ancient Near Eastern peoples, we Westerners would be considered a bunch of softies!

Sabbath-Breakers and Slanderers

The Sabbath-breaker story (Num. 15:32–36) comes on the heels of legislation regarding unintentional sins and defiant or “high-handed” sins. The stick-gathering Sabbath-breaker illustrates a defiant act; it's a direct violation of God's clear commands in Exodus 31 and 35. The one working on the Sabbath was to be put to death (Exod. 31:14–15). Then we have the son who blasphemes or slanders God—or “the Name” (Lev. 24)—as well as the stubborn, rebellious son (Deut. 21). These too are flagrant violations of what God had commanded.

Often, when first-time violations were committed in the midst of this fledgling nation, a harsh punishment came with it. Consider the high priests Nadab and Abihu, who [like father, like sons] imitated Aaron's idolatry in the golden calf incident (Exod. 32); they offered “strange fire”—a pagan ritual of Western Semitic cults that was associated with one's appointment to the priesthood—and were struck dead (Lev. 10).² And Israelite men, deliberately lured into adultery and idolatry by Midianite women, were struck down because of their disregard for God's covenant (Num. 25). During the Davidic monarchy, Uzzah tried to steady the tottering ark of the covenant as it was being transported (2 Sam. 6:1–7). How was he “thanked” for his efforts? God struck him dead! Even David was angered at God's actions.

Just think of Ananias and Sapphira in the New Testament (Acts 5), who were struck dead for lying about just how generous they were. The message wasn't lost on the early church: “great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:11). Especially in exemplary or first-time cases, God seems especially heavy-handed. God isn't to be trifled with. He takes sin seriously, and he is often setting a precedent with first-time offenses. For the people of God, these punishments were to be sobering reminders of what God expected.

So when Uzzah tried to steady the ark of the covenant, which David had placed on a “new cart,” God was making very clear that his instructions in the law of Moses had been ignored. The ark was to be carried on poles by the Levites (Exod. 25:12–15; 30:4), not transported by oxcart. And certain holy things weren't to be touched on pain of death (Num. 4:15). As God told Aaron and Moses after Nadab and Abihu were struck dead, “By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored” (Lev. 10:3).

The Glutton and the Drunkard: Deuteronomy 21:18–21

What about this harsh text, quoted earlier? We don't have any biblical record of this actually happening. But as with first-time offenses in Israel, the goal was to instruct: that “all Israel will hear of it and fear” (Deut. 21:21). What was the offense? We're not talking about a little practical joker or even about a teenager who won't clean up his room. No, he's an utter delinquent whose hardened, insubordinate behavior simply can't be corrected, despite everyone's best



efforts. He's a repeat offender: "when they [his father and his mother] chastise him, he will not even listen to them" (Deut. 21:18). He's a picture of insubordination—"a glutton and a drunkard" (v. 20; cf. Prov. 23:20–21). This serious problem would have had a profoundly destructive effect on the family and the wider community. (Jesus was called "a glutton and a drunkard," a very serious offense in Israel.)

This son, probably a firstborn, would inevitably squander his inheritance when his father died; he would likely bring ruin to his present and future family. He was like a compulsive gambler who bets away his home and life savings right out from under his family's feet. Notice, though, that the parents don't take matters into their own hands. They confer with the civil authorities, who are responsible for keeping an orderly, functioning society. The parents aren't in the picture any longer; they're not taking charge of punishment. Rather, the community carries out this exercise of social responsibility. And when it takes this drastic action, it's a tragic last resort to deal with this trouble.³

Mediums, Sorcerers, and False Prophets

Mediums (or diviners) and sorcerers (or soothsayers) were prohibited from living in Israel on pain of death (Lev. 19:26). Those predicting the future through omens or signs, telling fortunes, and attempting to contact spiritual (demonic) beings were outlawed. Likewise, false prophets, who sought to lead Israel into idolatry, were to be capitally punished (Deut. 13:1–11).

The cult of the dead was common in the ancient Near East, including Canaan. Ancient Near Eastern peoples attempted to consult or connect with the dead so that they could step in and help the living. These ancient Near Eastern religions advocated mourning rituals like cutting one's body for the dead and putting tattoo marks on the body (Lev. 19:28). The act of men trimming their hair on the sides of their head or the edges of their beard (Lev. 19:27) was a Canaanite practice of offering one's hair to departed spirits to appease them (cf. Deut. 14:1).

None of that was to take place in Israel! God's people were to be different from the nations around them; they were to focus on life and the God of life, not the dead or false deities. No one was to "consult the dead on behalf of the living" (Isa. 8:19; cf. 2:5–6). Israel's priests couldn't even attend funerals, unless they were relatives of the deceased (Lev. 21:1–5). They were to be "holy to their God" (v. 6). So mediums and fortune-tellers and the like—those in the dying business—were to be capitally punished.⁴

In a democratic society like ours, all of this sounds intolerant. We're to respect the freedom of religion of others, aren't we? Yet Israel had bound herself to Yahweh, who had made a covenant with Israel—like a husband to a wife. The people of Israel themselves had vowed that they were God's and that they would keep his covenant (Exod. 24:3). They had willingly submitted to God's (theocratic) rule. So any intrusion into this relationship—whether in the form of foreign deities, political alliances, or consulting with the dead—that replaced trust in God was in violation of these covenantal vows. Even so, it's misleading for Sam Harris to speak of stoning to death a son or daughter coming home from a yoga class.⁵ The point of Deuteronomy 13:6–16 is that of a false teacher who tries to "entice" the community by commanding worship of other deities ("let us go and serve other gods").



Of course, those not wanting to embrace Israel's God or obey his requirements were free to leave Israel and live in another nation. This was the obvious, preferable alternative. It was spiritually healthier for Israel and safer for theocracy opposers. Any remaining in the land were to respect the covenant and the laws that went with it.

Different Strokes for Different Folks

If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked, then it shall be if the wicked man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall then make him lie down and be beaten in his presence with the number of stripes according to his guilt. He may beat him forty times but no more, so that he does not beat him with many more stripes than these and your brother is not degraded in your eyes. (Deut. 25:1–3)

Remember when the American eighteen-year-old Michael Fay was jailed in Singapore back in 1994? He had gone on a rampage of theft and destruction, spray-painting cars at an auto dealership. Fay found out that you don't mess around like that in Singapore! After he and his parents pleaded with the authorities, he received four instead of six stinging lashes with a long cane.

Now the Singaporean strokes were less numerous but more severe than Semitic strokes. In Israel, rods were likely used. But, still, doesn't a punishment of forty strokes seem extremely harsh and overdone? Again, let's look more closely at this text to gain a greater appreciation for what is happening here:

1. A proper trial had to take place first.
2. No one was to exact punishment personally, taking matters into his own hands.
3. The process was to be supervised by the judge, who would ensure that the punishment was properly carried out; the punishment wasn't left up to the cruel whims of the punisher.
4. This was a maximum penalty, and offenders were typically punished with fewer strokes than forty. Yet the maximum number of lashes was fixed and wasn't to be exceeded.
5. The judge rendering the verdict and the punisher were to remember that the guilty party was a "brother." The criminal was to be protected from the overreaction of a mob or individual; he wasn't to be humiliated (so that "your brother is not degraded in your eyes").⁶

A beating with rods does sound harsh to modern ears. Yet the metaphor or image of the rod can have a gentler connotation of guiding, say, sheep (Ps. 23:4) and disciplining a child (Prov. 13:24; 22:15; 29:15).⁷ Again, the law prescribed a maximum punishment of strokes, and a judge could determine a lesser punishment. Furthermore, Israel's punishments were tame compared to the more brutal law codes and ruthlessness of other ancient Near Eastern cultures. For certain crimes, Hammurabi's code insisted that the tongue, breast, hand, or ear be cut off. One severe punishment involved the accused being dragged around a field by cattle.⁸ In ancient Egyptian law, punishments included cutting off the nose and the ear. The Code of Hammurabi insisted on death for a thief,⁹ whereas the Old Testament demanded only double compensation for the loss (Exod. 22:4). This contrast is one of many reminders that persons mattered more in



Israel's legislation than in other cultures in the ancient Near East. When punishing criminals (for perjury or libel, for example), Egyptian law permitted between one hundred and two hundred strokes; the hundred-stroke beating was the mildest form of punishment.¹⁰ Regarding penalties for theft in the Old Testament, David Baker observes, they “are much more humane than in most [ancient Near Eastern] laws, and never involve mutilation, beating, or death.”¹¹

How does Deuteronomy 25:1–3 look to you now? Israel's legislation allowed no more than forty strokes for a criminal's punishment. This was the maximum penalty, one left up to the judge's assessment. By contrast, punishments in other places in the ancient Near East were extremely severe. On top of all this, in Babylonian or Hittite law, for example, status or social rank determined the kind of sanctions for a particular crime. By contrast, biblical law held kings and priests and those of social rank to the same standards as the common person.¹²

Some may point to the following example as a moral upgrade. Initially, Hittite law stated that if a person plowed a sown field and sowed his own seed in its place, he was to be put to death.¹³ But in later legislation, the criminal needed ritual purification and to bring a sacrifice.¹⁴ While we can be grateful for this improvement, it still came nowhere near Israel's strong emphasis on compensation for property crimes, not the death penalty. People mattered more than property in Israel, a noted contrast with the rest of the ancient Near East.

“An Eye for an Eye”?

What of Scripture's emphasis on “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”? Some consider such exacting punishments ruthless and barbaric. We should take another look, though. A much different picture emerges upon closer inspection.

Such exacting punishments—called *lex talionis*—are mentioned in several places: Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:17–22; and Deuteronomy 19:16–21. What's interesting is that in none of the cases is “an eye for an eye” taken literally. Yes, “a life for a life” was taken in a straightforward way when it came to murder. Yet each example in these passages calls for (monetary) compensation, not bodily mutilation. For example, following on the heels of the *lex talionis* passage of Exodus 21:23–25 comes, well, Exodus 21:26–27! And it illustrates the point we're making quite nicely: “If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth” (NIV). We don't have a literal *eye* or *tooth* in view here, just compensation for bodily harm. Scholars such as Raymond Westbrook note that the *lex talionis* as a principle of compensation wasn't taken literally.¹⁵

The point of *lex talionis* is this: the punishment should fit the crime. Furthermore, these were the maximum penalties; punishments were to be proportional and couldn't exceed that standard. And a punishment could be less severe if the judge deemed that the crime required a lesser penalty.

Later in the New Testament, Jesus himself didn't take such language literally either. This language had been misapplied by Jesus's contemporaries *outside* the law courts as a pretext for personal vengeance (Matt. 5:38–39). At any rate, Jesus took this language no more literally than he did the language of plucking out eyes and cutting off hands if they lead one to sin (Matt. 5:29–30).



What's more, carrying out punishments that fit the crime protected the more vulnerable—the poor, the weak, the alienated. The wealthy and powerful couldn't dictate the terms of punishment; in fact, the socially elite could receive these proportional punishments like everyone else. In addition, this *lex talionis* principle served as a useful guide to prevent blood feuds and disproportionate retaliation (think Mafia methods here). When we compare Israel's punishments with other ancient Near Eastern legislation, the law of Moses presents a noteworthy moral development. As biblical scholar Brevard Childs points out, the *lex talionis* principle “marked an important advance and was far from being a vestige from a primitive age.”¹⁶

Some people might bring up the point that the Code of Hammurabi already had its own *lex talionis*, what we could call “a bone for a bone” as well as “a tooth for a tooth.” However, this applied when an aristocrat (a patrician)—not a common person (a plebian)—was injured by a peer.¹⁷ Furthermore, we know that the Code of Hammurabi called for the cutting off of actual hands, noses, breasts, and ears! Middle Assyrian laws (around 1100 BC)—over two hundred years after the law of Moses was given at Sinai—were outrageously disproportionate. They included beatings up to one hundred blows as well as mutilations. So the expression “an eye for an eye” was a measure of justice, not something Israel took literally.

Ox-goring legislation provides an interesting contrast between the Mosaic law and other ancient Near Eastern codes. Codes like those of Hammurabi or Eshnunna, for example, didn't reflect as high a regard for human life as did the Mosaic code. In the other codes, if an ox was in the habit of goring but the owner took no precautions to prevent it so that it gored and killed a free-born person, then a half mina (or two-thirds of a mina) in silver was paid to the victim's family and the ox lived.¹⁸ By contrast, Exodus 21:28–36 presents a more severe maximum punishment because of the value of human life, which was reflected in Israel's laws. The requirement was to put a goring ox to death (cf. Gen. 9:4–6), and its meat couldn't be eaten. Furthermore, if an ox was in the habit of goring and the owner did nothing to prevent this so that the ox killed a man or a woman, then the *owner*—not just the ox—could be put to death as a maximum penalty (and we'll look at another angle on this shortly).

Likewise, Hammurabi insisted that if a homebuilder was careless and his construction collapsed and killed a minor, then the builder's *own child* would be killed.¹⁹ By contrast, killing a child for the parents' offenses (or a parent for his child's offenses) wasn't permitted in Israel (Deut. 24:16).

Beyond all this, the ancient world lived by an unwritten code to take revenge for the killing of a family member. And it didn't matter whether or not the death was accidental: “You killed my family member; I'll kill someone in your family!” By contrast, Israel's law distinguished between *accidental* killing and *intentional* killing. It provided cities of refuge for those who had accidentally killed another (Exod. 21:12–13), a way of preventing ongoing blood feuds.²⁰

The noted historian Paul Johnson commented on the Code of Hammurabi, though much the same could be said for other ancient Near Eastern law codes: the “dreadful laws are notable for the ferocity of their physical punishments, in contrast to the restraint of the Mosaic Code and the enactments of Deuteronomy and Leviticus.”²¹

One further matter: We've seen that the various ancient Near Eastern laws we've explored are far more harsh in comparison to Israel's laws. Even so, a range of scholars argue that punishments in the Mosaic law—and even in various ancient Near Eastern law codes—are less fierce in actual practice. For example, Numbers 35:31 states, “You shall not take ransom [i.e.,



substitute payment] for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death.” This idea is reinforced in Exodus 21:29–30 (an ox goring a human to death as the result of owner negligence); since this isn’t premeditated murder, verse 30 allows for the possibility of monetary payment instead of taking the owner’s life: “If a ransom is demanded of him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is demanded of him.”

Walter Kaiser points out the general observation of Old Testament scholars: There were some sixteen crimes that called for the death penalty in the Old Testament. Only in the case of premeditated murder did the text say that the officials in Israel were forbidden to take a “ransom” or a “substitute.” This has widely been interpreted to imply that in all the other fifteen cases the judges could commute the crimes deserving of capital punishment by designating a “ransom” or “substitute.” In that case the death penalty served to mark the seriousness of the crime.²² One could cite other scholars such as Raymond Westbrook, Jacob Finkelstein, and Joseph Sprinkle, who readily concur with this assessment.²³

So if we take the severe Old Testament punishments literally, we observe that the Mosaic law is far *less* strict than other ancient Near Eastern law codes. If, on the other hand, we follow these scholars who take the Old Testament’s capital punishment laws as allowing for a “ransom” payment instead (with the exception of premeditated murder), then this opens up a dramatically new perspective on these apparently severe punishments.

Infant Sacrifice in Israel?

Not a few critics will point out that the Old Testament assumes that infant sacrifice was acceptable in Israelite society and demanded as an act of worship by the God of Israel. Some will showcase Abraham and Isaac (though hardly an infant) as one such example. Such criticisms are off the mark, however.

For one thing, the Mosaic law clearly condemns child sacrifice as morally abhorrent (Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5; Deut. 12:31; 18:10). As Susan Niditch points out in *War in the Hebrew Bible*, the “dominant voice” in the Old Testament “condemns child sacrifice” since it opposes God’s purposes and undermines Israelite society.²⁴

Let’s look at a couple of passages that allegedly suggest that human sacrifice was acceptable.

Mesha, King of Moab: 2 Kings 3:27

Then he took his oldest son who was to reign in his place, and offered him as a burnt offering on the wall. And there came great wrath against Israel, and they departed from him and returned to their own land. (2 Kings 3:27)

Here, Mesha, king of Moab, sacrifices his firstborn son on the wall of Kir Hareseth (in Moab). After this, the Israelite army withdrew because of “wrath.” Some think this is *God’s* wrath and that God is showing his *approval* of Mesha’s sacrifice of his son by responding in wrath against Israel. This view, however, has its problems:

- This notion is at odds with clear condemnation of child sacrifice earlier in the Pentateuch (Deut. 12:31; 18:10) as well as repudiation of it within Kings itself (2 Kings 16:3; 17:7;



21:6).

- The word fury or wrath (*qetseph*) isn't *divine* wrath.²⁵ Elsewhere in 2 Kings, a cognate word (coming from the same root as *qetseph*) clearly refers to *human* fury (5:11; 13:19).
- Typically, commentators suggest several plausible interpretations: (1) This was Moab's fury against Israel because their king, Mesha, forced by desperation, sacrificed his son; Mesha's goal was to prompt Moab's renewed determination to fight. (2) The Israelites were filled with horror or superstitious dread when they saw this human sacrifice, causing them to abandon the entire venture. (3) Even though Mesha had failed in his attempt to break through the siege (perhaps to head north for reinforcements), he was still able to capture the king of Edom's firstborn son, whom he sacrificed on the wall, which demoralized Edom's army. The wrath of Edom's army ended the war because they withdrew from the military coalition of Israel, Judah, and Edom.²⁶

Jephthah's Daughter: Judges 11:30–40

Israel's judge Jephthah made a rash vow: "whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon [who were oppressing Israel], it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:31). Perhaps he was thinking it might be one of his servants, who would most likely come out to attend to him. Yet he was horrified to see that "his daughter was coming out to meet him with tambourines and with dancing" (v. 34).

Some Old Testament scholars argue that Jephthah didn't literally sacrifice his daughter. Most, however, are convinced that the text asserts this. So let's take for granted the worst-case scenario. Then come the inevitable questions: Wouldn't Jephthah have clearly known that child sacrifice was immoral and that God judged the Canaanites for such practices? Why then did he go ahead with this sacrifice? Was it because God really did approve of child sacrifice after all?

We've already affirmed that *is* doesn't mean *ought* in the Old Testament; just because something is *described* doesn't mean it's *prescribed* as a standard to follow. Certain behaviors are just bad examples that we shouldn't follow (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1–12). So let's make the necessary changes and apply our questioner's reasoning to another judge—Samson. As a judge of Israel, wouldn't he have clearly known that touching unclean corpses was forbidden (Judg. 14:8–9), especially given his (permanent) Nazirite vow (Num. 6)? Wasn't he fully aware that consorting with prostitutes was prohibited (Judg. 16:1)? You get the idea. Keep in mind that we're talking about the era of Israel's judges. To borrow from Charles Dickens, this was in large part the worst of times, an age of foolishness, the season of darkness, and the winter of despair. So critics should be careful about assuming that Jephthah (or Samson) was in peak moral condition.

Some might wonder, "Didn't 'the Spirit of the Lord' come on Jephthah?" (Judg. 11:29). Yes, but we shouldn't take this as a wholesale divine endorsement of all Jephthah did—no more so than the Spirit's coming on Gideon (Judg. 6:34) was a seal of approval on his dabbling with idolatry (Judg. 8:24–27), or of Ehud's, for that matter (Judg. 3:26). Yes, these judges of Israel would surely have known idolatry was wrong. Likewise, "the Spirit of the Lord" came upon Samson to help Israel keep the Philistines at bay (Judg. 14:6, 19; 15:14). Yet his plans to marry a Philistine woman, cavorting with a prostitute, and getting mixed up with Delilah all reveal a



judge with exceedingly poor judgment! We can surely find a lesson in here somewhere about how God works *despite* human sin and failure.

The theology of Judges emphasizes a remarkable low point of Israelite morality and religion, with two vivid narratives at the book's end to illustrate this (chaps. 17–21). Israel continually allowed itself to be “Canaanized.” And in light of Judges' repeated theme, “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6; 21:25; cf. 2:10–23), we shouldn't be surprised that Israel's leaders were also morally compromised. We don't have to look hard for negative role models in Judges, when Israel was in the moral basement. The Jephthah story needs no explicit statement of God's obvious disapproval.

Some might press the point: doesn't the Old Testament refer to offering the firstborn to God (Exod. 22:29–30)? Following Ezekiel 20:25–26, they claim that God literally gave harmful (“not good”) statutes by which Israel could not “live”—commands involving sacrificing the firstborn child in the fire. They assert that Yahweh just didn't like it when Israel sacrificed children to *other* gods!

However, no such distinction is made; infant sacrifice—whether to Yahweh or to Baal or Molech—is still detestable. Yes, this was a common practice in Israel and Judah (e.g., 2 Kings 17:17; 23:10), and kings Ahaz, Manasseh, and others made their sons and daughters “pass through the fire” (2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chron. 33:6). But commonality here doesn't imply acceptability. Exodus does refer to the “redemption”—not sacrifice—of the womb-opening firstborn child; God himself redeemed his firstborn Israel by bringing him up from Egypt (Exod. 13:13; cf. 4:23).

What then is Ezekiel talking about? The text clearly indicates that God gave the Sinai generation “statutes” (*chuqqot*) (e.g., Sabbath commands) by which an Israelite might “live” (20:12–13). Israel rejected these laws given at Sinai; they refused to follow them (v. 21). So God “withdrew [His] hand.” God responded to the second (or wilderness) generation as he does in Romans 1: he “gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by” (Ezek. 20:25 NIV). Ezekiel not only distinguishes this word *statutes* (the masculine plural *chuqqim*) from *statutes* elsewhere in the context (the feminine noun *chuqqot*). The text also involves quite a bit of irony. God sarcastically tells Israel to “go, serve everyone his idols” (Ezek. 20:39); to put it another way, “go, sacrifice your children.” This ironic “statute” to stubborn Israel to continue in idolatry and infant sacrifice is comparable to God's sarcasm in Amos 4:4: “Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more” (NIV). The same is true of the prophet Micaiah, who tells the disobedient, Yahweh-ignoring king of Israel, “Go up and succeed, and the Lord will give it into the hand of the king” (1 Kings 22:15). These are the sorts of sarcastic “commands” that aren't “good” and by which Israel can't “live.”²⁷

The Value of Unborn Life

One of the big differences between Old Testament laws and their ancient Near Eastern counterparts is the value of human life. Despite this, it's not unusual to hear that in ancient Israel unborn life wasn't as valuable as life outside the womb. Indeed, certain proabortion advocates have sought theological justification for permitting abortion in the following passage:

If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely [some advocate an alternate reading: “she has a miscarriage”] but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined



whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise (Exod. 21:22–25 NIV).

The key issue is this: should the Hebrew word *yalad* be translated “give birth prematurely” or “have a miscarriage”? If the mother miscarries, then the offender only has to pay a fine; the implication in this case is that the unborn child isn't as valuable and therefore isn't deserving of care normally given to a person outside the womb. Apparently, this Old Testament passage shows a low(er) regard for unborn life.

Let's skip to another passage, Psalm 139, which strongly supports the value of the unborn:

For you created my inmost being;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 your works are wonderful,
 I know that full well.
 My frame was not hidden from you
 when I was made in the secret place.
 When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
 your eyes saw my unformed body.
 All the days ordained for me
 were written in your book
 before one of them came to be. (vv. 13–16 NIV)

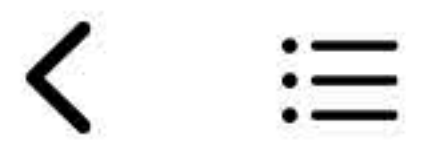
Keep this text in mind as we go back to the Exodus 21 passage.

Contrary to the above claims, Exodus 21 actually supports the value of unborn human life. The word *yalad* means “go forth” or “give birth,” describing a normal birth (Gen. 25:26; 38:28–30; Job 3:11; 10:18; Jer. 1:5; 20:18). It's always used of giving birth, not of a miscarriage. If the biblical text intended to refer to a miscarriage, the typical word for “miscarry/miscarriage” (*shakal/shekol*) was available (e.g., Gen. 31:38; Exod. 23:26; Job 21:10; Hosea 9:14). *Miscarry* isn't used here.

Furthermore, *yalad* (“give birth”) is always used of a child that has recognizable human form or is capable of surviving outside the womb. The Hebrew word *nepel* is the typical word used of an unborn child, and the word *golem*, which means “fetus,” is used only once in the Old Testament in Psalm 139:16, which we just noted: God knew the psalmist's “unformed body” or “unformed substance.”

This brings us to another question: Who is injured? The baby or the mother? The text is silent. It could be either, since the feminine pronoun is missing. The gist of the passage seems to be this:

If two men fight and hit a pregnant woman and the baby is born prematurely, but there is no serious injury [to the child or the mother], then the offender must be fined whatever the husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury [to the baby or the mother], you are to take life for life, eye for eye.



These verses then actually imply the intrinsic value of the unborn child—that the life of the offender may be taken if the mother’s or the child’s life is lost. The unborn child is given the same rights as an adult (Gen. 9:6).

New Atheists and other critics often resort to caricatures or misrepresentations of the Old Testament laws. While Mosaic laws do not always reflect the ultimate or the ideal (which the Old Testament itself acknowledges), these laws and the mind-set they exhibit reveal a dramatic moral improvement and greater moral sensitivity than their ancient Near Eastern counterparts.

Further Reading

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10

Misogynistic?

Women in Israel

When we start talking about the treatment of women in the Old Testament, the pandemonium begins! Feminists accuse Old Testament writers of endorsing all kinds of sexism, patriarchy (socially oppressive structures favoring men over women), and even misogyny (hatred of women). *Misogynistic* is one of the adjectives Richard Dawkins uses to describe the Old Testament God.

Why does Sarah refer to her husband as “my master” (Gen. 18:12 NIV)? Why do Hebrew girls belong to their “father’s house” (e.g., Lev. 22:13)? Why does an Israelite woman remain ceremonially unclean for only forty days after giving birth to a boy but eighty days after having a girl (Lev. 12:2–5)? Why can’t women participate in the priesthood of Israel? What about all those concubines? What about levirate marriage? Why does God permit polygamy? Doesn’t the Old Testament endorse a bride-price, which only reinforces the idea of women as property?

In this chapter, we’ll look at the underlying male-female equality in the Old Testament and some passages that allegedly suggest otherwise. Then in the next chapter we’ll review some key passages related to polygamy (multiple wives) and concubines as well as related passages that critics commonly mention.¹

Genesis 1–2: The Original Ideal

However we understand the levitical laws and Old Testament narratives regarding women, Genesis 1–2 points us to the ideal view of women, which is far from a fallen, skewed, or demeaning attitude. God creates male *and female* in his image (Gen. 1:26–27). Eve is taken from Adam’s rib (Gen. 2:22), a picture of equality and partnership, not one of a superior to an inferior. Marriage is to be a partnership of equals, and sex (the one-flesh union) is to be enjoyed within the safety of lifelong, heterosexual marriage (Gen. 2:24).

Although Genesis 1–2 spells out the ideal of male-female equality, laws regarding women in Israel take a realistic approach to fallen human structures in the ancient Near East. In Israel’s legislation, God does two things: (1) he works within a patriarchal society to point Israel to a better path; and (2) he provides many protections and controls against abuses directed at females in admittedly substandard conditions. Do we see examples of oppressed women in the Old Testament? Yes, and we see lots of oppressed *men* as well! In other words, we shouldn’t consider these negative examples *endorsements* of oppression and abuse.



The Equality of Women—from Various Angles

Reading the Old Testament reveals two important parallel features: (1) patriarchal social structures in Israelite families alongside (2) the honoring of women as equals, including a bevy of prominent matriarchs and female leaders in Israel.

On the one hand, fathers had legal responsibility for their households (often reaching fifteen to twenty members); this included matters of family inheritance, property ownership, marital arrangements of sons and daughters, and being spokesman for family matters in general. For instance, when a daughter or a wife took a vow, such solemn promises were to be approved by the father/ husband as the legal point person in the home (Num. 30). This represents more than just legal protection for a wife or a daughter, though. Embedded social attitudes and ideas die hard, especially in places like the ancient Near East. Patriarchal attitudes were strongly held in the ancient Near East—attitudes that were a far cry from the equality language at creation. Genesis 2:24 affirms that a man was to leave his parents and “cling” to his wife as an equal partner (NRSV). But the fall deeply affected human relationships. As a result, Sarah followed the ancient Near Eastern custom of calling her husband “lord [’*adon*]” (Gen. 18:12). She gave her handmaid Hagar to Abraham to produce a child (Gen. 16:3), a common ancient Near Eastern practice. Later king Abimelech “took” Sarah as his wife (Gen. 20:2–3). And when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she “bore a son to Abraham” (Gen. 21:2–3).

On the other hand, these embedded patriarchal attitudes distorted the many strong biblical affirmations of female dignity and equality. Mothers/wives deserved honor equal to that of husbands/fathers, and strong matriarchs both helped lead Israel and had sway within their households. Yes, the husband was the legal point person for the Israelite family, but we shouldn’t automatically assume that women considered this an oppressive arrangement. In fact, wives in many Old Testament marriages were, for all practical purposes, equal and equally influential in their marriages and beyond (e.g., Prov. 31).

In fact, many passages speak more of protection and care for those who are often taken advantage of, especially widows or divorced women. God is concerned about justice for widows and the other vulnerables of society such as orphans and non-Israelite strangers or aliens. God sternly warned would-be oppressors that he’s on the side of the weak and defenseless (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; 14:29; 24:17, 19; etc.).

Now, feminists would dispute the claim that Israelite women/wives were considered equal in personhood and dignity to men/husbands. Let’s address this point. Yes, patriarchal structures strongly influenced the mind-set of Israelite society. Yet we see undeniable affirmations of equality in the Old Testament from theological, historical, and legal perspectives.

Theological: Female equality is presumed in the following passages (emphasis added):

Genesis 1:27: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; *male and female* He created them.”

Genesis 2:24: “For this reason a man shall leave *his father and his mother*, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”

Exodus 20:12: “Honor *your father and your mother*, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you” (cf. 21:15; Deut. 5:16; 21:18–21; 27:16).

Leviticus 19:3: “Every one of you shall reverence *his mother and his father*” (cf. 20:9).



Proverbs 6:20: “My son, observe the commandment of *your father* and do not forsake the teaching of *your mother*.”

Proverbs 18:22: “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD.”

Proverbs 19:26: “He who assaults *his father* and drives *his mother* away is a shameful and disgraceful son.”

Proverbs 23:22: “Listen to *your father* who begot you, and do not despise *your mother* when she is old.”

Proverbs 23:25: “Let *your father and your mother* be glad, and let her rejoice who gave birth to you.”

Song of Songs 6:3: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (cf. 7:10).

When it comes to Genesis 2:18, where Adam’s wife is called a suitable “helper [‘ezer],” we should recall that, rather than suggesting inferiority, the same word is used of God elsewhere in Scripture (Pss. 10:14; 30:10; 54:4). We could list more passages on these theological aspects, but you get the idea.

Historical: The Old Testament is full of powerful matriarchs who were highly valued and exerted a great deal of influence. The testimony of the Old Testament authors reveals a perspective that can hardly be called misogynistic. Consider the following list for starters: Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, and Tamar (all in Genesis); the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah (Exod. 1); the Egyptian princess (Exod. 2); Miriam and Jethro’s seven daughters, including Zipporah, Moses’s wife (Exod. 2, 4, 15); the daughters of Zelophehad (Num. 27); Deborah, Ruth, Naomi, Abigail, and Bathsheba (Judg. 4–5; Ruth 1–4; 1 Sam. 25; 1 Kings 1–2); and let’s not forget that excellent Proverbs 31 woman. These strong women stepped forward and wielded influence with the best of the men.

Legal: The moral and ceremonial laws of Israel presumed that women were not only equal but also shared equal moral responsibility with the men. One author writes that the system of Israel’s ritual impurity laws is “rather even-handed in its treatment of gender.”² Some might quibble with the ceremonial uncleanness of menstruation, which obviously affects women and not men. But as we’ll see, men have their own issues! And the purity laws also address these (e.g., Lev. 15:16–18, 32; 22:4; Deut. 23:10).

The moral—not just ceremonial—aspects of the levitical laws that address incest and adultery (e.g., Lev. 18, 20) apply to men and women without distinction. In fact, those claiming that committing adultery against one’s neighbor’s wife was a “property offense” in Israel are incorrect. Both the man and the woman can be put to death for adultery, but, unlike the Code of Hammurabi, Old Testament law never requires the death penalty for property offenses.³

Texts That (Allegedly) Promote Female Inferiority

Now it’s time to look at some of those potentially embarrassing passages that put down women.

The Trial of Jealousy: Numbers 5

Let’s summarize the theme of this text. If a man suspected his wife of adultery, he could bring her before the priest to accuse her. In this case, two or three witnesses weren’t available (Deut. 17:6–7); the only “witness” was the husband’s suspicion that his wife had been cheating



on him. Critics charge that this would have been a terrifying ordeal: a cheating wife's abdomen would swell and her thigh would shrivel after drinking "the water of bitterness." Critics raise the question, "Why couldn't *a woman* bring her husband before the priest if she suspected that *he* was guilty of adultery?"

As it turns out, critics have chosen a poor text to illustrate oppression of women. For one thing, consider the context, which gives us every reason to think that this law applied to *men* as well. Before and after this passage, the legislation concerns both men and women: "Israelites" (Num. 5:2 NIV), "a man or woman" (Num. 5:6), "a man or a woman" (Num. 6:2). It wasn't just the husband's prerogative to call for this special trial; the wife could as well.

Second, this priestly court was actually arranged for the protection and defense of women, not to humiliate them before proud husbands or prejudiced mobs. This law protected women from a husband's violent rage or arbitrary threat of divorce to get rid of his wife cheaply.⁴ And if the woman happened to be guilty, then she'd *rightly* be terrified by a supernatural sign affecting her body. In fact, as with the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in the early church (Acts 5), the Israelites would have a sobering warning regarding God's attitude toward adultery.

Some critics have compared this event to "the River Ordeal" practiced in non-Israelite ancient Near Eastern cultures (Babylon, Assyria, Sumer). How did this work? When criminal evidence was inconclusive, the accused would be thrown into a bitumen well—that is, a natural petroleum tar commonly used as a sealant and adhesive and as mortar for bricks. In Sumer, this tar "river" was the abode of the god Id (which means "river"). Sometimes these "jumpers" and "plungers," who went "into the god," were overcome by the liquid and its toxic fumes; most survived (they were "spat out" by the river god), but it was still a nightmare to endure. If one was overcome by the "river," he was guilty since his death was the river god's "judgment." If he survived, he was innocent and the accuser was guilty of making false charges.⁵

There's a big difference between this "ordeal" and Numbers 5, though. The river ordeal was the general treatment for inconclusive criminal evidence *across the board*. In the Mosaic law, however, a charge couldn't be established unless two or three witnesses were available; otherwise, the prosecuting side didn't have a case—end of story. (In the unique trial of jealousy in Numbers 5, though witnesses weren't available, it's understandable that certain clues might tip off a husband or a wife to something fishy going on with a spouse—strange behavior, irrational reactions, breaking out into sudden sweats, or simply the husband's belief that he wasn't involved in his wife's conception of a child.)

Second, if the accused couldn't swim and get out of the tar, he looked guilty even if he were innocent! Not so if an Israelite wife (or husband) was falsely accused. A telltale supernatural sign was provided to prove guilt. Third, the river ordeal assumed guilt until innocence was proven; in the trial of jealousy, the court assumed innocence unless guilt was exposed by a divinely given miracle.

Impurity at Childbirth: Leviticus 12:1–8

This passage, some claim, implies female inferiority: the woman is ceremonially impure for forty days (7 + 33 days) after giving birth to a *boy* but eighty days (14 + 66 days) after giving birth to a *girl*. Surely this reveals a lower social status for females.



Again, not so fast! Various sensible explanations have been proposed. Some scholars argue that more days for the female actually indicate a kind of protection of females rather than a sign of inferiority. Others suggest the motive may be to preserve Israel's religious distinctiveness over against Canaanite religion, in which females engaged in religious sexual rites in their temples.

In general, a Jewish mother's lengthier separation from the tabernacle (or temple) after giving birth to a girl made a theological and ethical statement. In ancient Near Eastern polytheism, the strong emphasis was on fertility rites, cult prostitution, and the dramatization of the births of gods and goddesses. The distance between the birth event and temple worship—especially with baby girls—was carefully maintained.

Another plausible explanation focuses on a natural source of uncleanness—namely, the flow of blood. Verse 5 refers to the reason: it's because of “the blood of her purification.” The mother experiences vaginal bleeding at birth. Yet such vaginal bleeding is common in newborn girls as well, due to the withdrawal of the mother's estrogen when the infant girl exits the mother's womb. So we have *two* sources of ritual uncleanness with a girl's birth but *only one* with a boy's.

Notice also that when the time of purification is over, whether “for a son or for a daughter,” the mother is to bring the identical offering (whether a lamb, pigeon, or turtledove); this is to be a *purification* offering (12:6)—not technically a sin offering—and its purpose is to take away the ritual (not moral) impurity.⁶

Levirate Marriage: Deuteronomy 25:5–10

If a man died without a son to carry on the family name, then his unmarried brother could marry his widow in order to sustain the family name. Legally, the firstborn son from this union was officially the deceased husband's son. Since the first husband was deceased, this wasn't considered incest (sexual relations with an in-law). The term *levirate* comes from the Latin word for “husband's brother” or “brother-in-law,” *levir*. This legislation sounds quite strange to modern ears, and it certainly does reflect a patriarchal background. A similar practice was carried out by the Hittites. Their law stated that if a man has a wife and then dies, his brother must take the widow as his wife.⁷

While levirate marriage was an admittedly patriarchal arrangement, we should keep certain things in mind. First, if the widow did marry her deceased husband's brother, this would help keep the widow's property (which she may have brought to the marriage) within the family. Marrying *outside* the family meant running the risk of losing it.⁸ Second, although the man could refuse, this was discouraged. And if he refused to comply, the widow herself could exert her role and her rights in the shaming “sandal ceremony.” So the widow had a certain natural advantage in this arrangement.

It's instructive to place this levirate scenario next to the story of Zelophehad's daughters (Num. 27:1–11). In the ancient Near East, there existed patriarchal laws of primogeniture—the firstborn's right to receive property and inherit family headship from the father. Deuteronomy 21:17 reveals that this meant a double portion for the firstborn over his brothers. Yet primogeniture is subtly overturned at various points in the Old Testament. Though Mosaic legislation operated within patriarchal structures of the ancient Near East, the Old Testament reveals a certain dynamism and openness to change. The daughters of the deceased, sonless Zelophe-



had appealed to Moses regarding the male-favoring inheritance laws. In light of the women's particular circumstances, Moses took this matter before God, and the daughters' appeal was granted.

When humans sought to change social structures in light of a deeper moral insight and a determination to move toward the ideal, we witness an adaptation of ancient Near Eastern structures. Even earlier in the Old Testament, various narratives subtly attack the primogeniture arrangement; the younger regularly supersedes the elder: Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph/Judah over Reuben.⁹ This biblical sampling reveals a subversive and more democratic ethic; though not ideal, it's a drastic improvement over other ancient Near Eastern laws.¹⁰

Your Neighbor's Wife: Exodus 20:17

"You shall not covet" is the tenth commandment. It prohibits longing for what rightfully belongs to another. What's included in this prohibition? A neighbor's house, wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, and "anything that belongs to your neighbor." Critics complain that a wife is unflatteringly and inappropriately viewed as property—in the same category as a neighbor's house, ox, or donkey!

One big problem: just a few commands earlier (Exod. 20:12), children are commanded to give their mother honor *equal to* that of the father. A mother was to have equal authority over her children. (Check out the string of verses cited earlier in this chapter.) Another big problem: women in Israel weren't saleable items like houses, oxen, or donkeys. A further revealing fact is that in other cultures in the ancient Near East, the mother was often under the control of the son.¹¹ Yet the Mosaic law presents a striking contrast in this regard. Leviticus 19:3 commands a son to revere mother and father alike—and the mother is even listed first.

No Female Priests?

Why couldn't women participate in the priesthood? Why was this restricted to males alone? Many critics have a beef with this males-only religious club. But if you think about it, most Israelite males were excluded too! Priests had to be from the tribe of Levi and from the line of Aaron; also, non-Israelite males weren't allowed to be priests.

But it's not as though the Old Testament automatically places *female* and *priesthood* in opposite categories. The Bible says plenty about female priests. Back in Genesis, Eve herself had a priestly role in Eden's garden; biblical scholars see this location as a sanctuary that foreshadows the tabernacle (cf. Gen. 2:12). Both Adam and Eve carried out priestly duties of worship and service to God, who would walk and talk with them (Gen. 2:15; 3:8).

Later, the priesthood was extended to the entire nation of Israel—male *and female*. God desired that *all Israelites* approach him as a "kingdom of priests" (Exod. 19:6). However, they refused to go up to the mountain; so Moses went in their place (20:19, 21). As a result, an official male priesthood was formed to function within the tabernacle/temple structure.¹²

So having female priests is not inherently problematic or unbiblical. Indeed, the New Testament reaffirms this: with the death and resurrection of Jesus, a new Israel—the church—was created; it is a holy priesthood and a kingdom of priests who offer up spiritual sacrifices to God (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).



Why then no females in the Old Testament tabernacle/temple? The reason is this: to prevent the contamination of pure worship in Israel. In ancient Near Eastern religions, the gods (and goddesses) themselves partook in grotesque sex acts. They engaged in incest (e.g., Baal with his sister Anat). They participated in bestiality (e.g., Baal having sex with a heifer, which gives birth to a son). And they engaged in sexual orgies and seductions. And all this without a hint of condemnation!¹³

The religions of the ancient Near East commonly included fertility cult rituals, goddess worship, and priestesses (who served as the wife of the god). Temple prostitutes abounded, and sexual immorality was carried out in the name of religion. To have sex with priestesses meant union with the goddess you worshiped. In fact, sex with a temple prostitute would prompt Baal and his consort Asherah to have sex in heaven, which in turn would result in fertility all the way around—more kids, more cattle, more crops. Sex was deified in Canaan and other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Adultery was fine as long as sex was “religious.”¹⁴ If we become what we worship, then it’s not surprising that Canaanite religion and society became corrupted by “sacred sex.” Therefore, Canaanite female and male cult prostitutes were forbidden (cf. Gen. 38:15, 22–30; Deut. 23:18–19; also Hosea 4:14). Israel wasn’t to imitate the nations whose deities engaged in sexual immorality.

Were these religions tolerant? Yes, in all the wrong ways! From the gods downward, all kinds of sexual deviations were tolerated, but to the detriment of society and family. Indeed, many ancient Near Eastern law codes permitted activities that undermined family integrity and stability. For example, men were permitted to engage in adulterous relations with slaves and prostitutes. The laws of Lipit-Ishtar of Lower Mesopotamia (1930 BC) take for granted the practice of prostitution.¹⁵ In Hittite law (1650–1500 BC), “If a father and son sleep with the same female slave or prostitute, it is not an offence.”¹⁶ As an aside, Hittite law even permitted bestiality: “If a man has sexual relations with either a horse or a mule, it is not an offence.”¹⁷

The law of Moses sought to prevent Israelites from glorifying adultery (or worse) in the name of religious devotion. Keeping an all-male priesthood, then, helped create this kind of religious distinction as well as preserved the sanctity of marriage. It wasn’t a slam against women. It was a matter of preserving religious purity and the sanctity of sex within marriage.

Keep in mind that in Israel priests carried out three kinds of duties:

1. teaching, judicial, administrative
2. prophetic (e.g., discerning God’s will through the casting of lots, known as the Urim and Thummim)
3. cultic (religious ceremonies/rituals)

In Old Testament Israel, women like Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4–5, esp. 4:4), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14) fulfilled the first two roles as teachers, judges, and prophetesses. The third area was prohibited to women—and *most other males*. In fact, even Israel’s kings couldn’t carry out various cultic duties (2 Chron. 26:16–21). So while patriarchalism was embedded in Israelite attitudes, that wasn’t what kept women from being priests; rather, it was a matter of Israel’s religious identity and moral well-being.

We could cover more territory than this, but hopefully these responses to the critics’ arguments will help put these passages in context—and put some of the contentiousness to rest.



Further Reading

Davidson, Richard M. *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007.

Jones, Clay. “Why We Don’t Hate Sin so We Don’t Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to ‘Divine Genocide’ Arguments.” *Philosophia Christi* n.s. 11 (2009): 53–72.

11

Bride-Price?

Polygamy, Concubinage, and Other Such Questions

Since the time of Thomas Jefferson, rumors have been swirling regarding his fathering a child through his slave girl Sally Hemings. During the 1990s, the discussion was ramped up, and President Jefferson was allegedly exposed as a hypocritical founding father. Further research, though, has shown that the likely culprit was Thomas's younger brother Randolph, who was at Monticello around the very time Hemings conceived and who was known to spend time with the slaves. On the other hand, Thomas, who was sixty-four at this time, was battling severe health problems, including intense migraines. Randolph, though given to drunkenness, was in better health, and his character wasn't nearly as refined as Thomas's.¹

Now, if Thomas were the father of Hemings's child, then so much the worse for him! And his having slaves (with conflicted feelings, we should add) still wouldn't undermine the Declaration of Independence's affirmation that all humans are "created equal" and are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." The same is true in the Old Testament. Even if prominent Old Testament figures had more than one wife or had concubines, this still doesn't overturn the standard of monogamy in Genesis 2:24. But was polygamy legally permitted? Or did Israel's laws prohibit this practice, even if Elkanah, David, Solomon, and others disregarded the prohibition?

In the ancient Near East, a married man could take a concubine—or second-class wife—when his situation was "inconceivable," that is, if his first wife was presumed to be infertile (or even if she became sick). In such cases, it wasn't unusual for a man to take another wife to produce offspring. When we look at Israel's history, we see the influence of this practice fairly early on. The family was central, and having children was vital to carrying on the family memory. To be childless—and therefore heirless—was considered a tragedy and even a disgrace. So a second-tier wife was often brought in to remedy the situation.

In the ancient Near East, polygamy was taken for granted and not officially prohibited. It was legally sanctioned in the Code of Hammurabi, which permitted the owner of a female slave, since she was property, to utilize her sexual and reproductive powers to bear children; if she produced children, she could go free on the death of her master.²

The earliest reference to polygamy (bigamy) in the Old Testament is the not-so-nice Lamech, who takes two wives (Gen. 4:19, 23–24)—the first of over thirty references to polygamy in the Old Testament. Later on in Genesis, Abraham couldn't produce a child with Sarah; so she gave him her servant Hagar as a "wife" (Gen. 16:3), and Ishmael came as a result. His birth produced conflict between Sarah and Hagar, with Abraham in the middle of it all. Hagar had apparently won in this game of one-up-womanship, until Sarah sent her away. (We'll look at the Sarah-Hagar story when we get to slavery and the New Testament.)

The same problems came to Jacob. Through trickery, he ended up with two wives instead of one. When Rachel and Leah realized they were infertile, in desperation they gave Jacob their handmaids in hopes of producing children in this honor-shame competition. One of these handmaids, Bilhah, is called both "concubine" and one of Jacob's "wives" (Gen. 35:22; 37:2), a second-string wife.

So there was apparently something official in this arrangement, even though the handmaids were second-tier wives. Concubines at times were simply second-class wives, though still officially married. Or the term can refer to a second wife who comes after the first one has died. For example, after Sarah died, the widower Abraham took another wife, Keturah. First Chronicles 1:32 refers to her as a "concubine [*pilegish*]," but this term can be used of a legitimate wife, just not the original wife of a man.³ Even the concubine mentioned in Judges 19 wasn't a mistress; she was considered married to a "husband" (v. 3). The text uses "father-in-law" and "son-in-law" to indicate genuine marital status (vv. 4–5, 7, etc.).

While polygamous marriages (including concubines) occurred in the Old Testament *without* God's stamp of approval, keep in mind that such marriages *still* brought with them a husband's commitment to protect and provide for his wife. By contrast, if a child came through a woman hired for sexual pleasure, this brought shame and no inheritance (e.g., Jephthah in Judg. 11:1–2).

When it came to Israel's rulers, political maneuvering—not simply sexual pleasure—was often involved in taking concubines. Things eventually get ridiculous with Solomon having seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3), often taken from other nations for purposes of political alliances. Yet Deuteronomy 17:17 strictly warned that Israel's future king(s) shouldn't "multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself"; nor should he accumulate (chariot) horses or return to Egypt.

As it turns out, Solomon did *all* of these things, which were his downfall (1 Kings 11:1). In 1 Kings, the biblical narrator uses irony to denounce Solomon's leadership and spiritual qualifications. From the very start of his reign, he violated all of these prohibitions: (1) marrying Pharaoh's daughter and other foreign wives (3:1; 11:1–8); (2) accumulating (chariot) horses (10:26); (3) hoarding silver and gold (10:27); (4) making an alliance with Egypt through marriage (3:1).⁴ Solomon was also a tyrant who, according to his son Rehoboam, put a "heavy yoke" on Israel and "scourged [them] with whips" (12:4, 14 NIV). Solomon's disobedience and heavy-handedness eventually led to Israel's divided kingdom. Solomon squandered the potential and the gifts God had given him. He failed to meet God's conditions: if Solomon would obey, God would establish his kingdom; if he worshiped false gods, then Israel would be cut off from the land God had given them (1 Kings 9:4–8). The appointed moral, spiritual example in Israel failed spectacularly, especially in the area of marriage.

Endorsements of Polygamy?

There's the joke: "I treat both my wives equally. Isn't that bigamy?" We see a good deal of bigamy (two wives) in the Old Testament, and it's not unusual to hear critics say, based on certain Old Testament texts, that God actually endorses polygamy/bigamy. However, if God commended or commanded such a practice, this would be a deviation from the assumed standard of heterosexual monogamy in Genesis 2:24 and elsewhere. We'll look at several key texts on this topic.

No Polygamy: Leviticus 18:18

An excellent case can be made that Leviticus 18:18 prohibits polygamy: "Do not take your wife's sister [literally, 'a woman to her sister'] as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living" (NIV).⁵ This text is regularly overlooked in discussions of polygamy in the Old Testament. Part of the reason for this oversight is where this verse happens to be found. This verse's significance is obscured because it's preceded by various anti-incest laws (vv. 6–17). We'll see, however, that Leviticus 18:18 is a transitional verse and shouldn't be included in the anti-incest section. A major break occurs between verses 17 and 18.

Each verse in 7–17 begins identically, starting with the noun "the nakedness (of) [*erwat*]," and it leads up to the command, "You shall not uncover ____'s nakedness." Also, in each of these verses (except v. 9) an explanation is given for the prohibition (e.g., "she is your mother"); this explanation isn't found in verse 18, which we would expect if it were an incest prohibition.

By contrast, each verse in 18–23 begins with a different construction. Even if you don't read Hebrew, you can truly just glance at the text and immediately see the difference in structure starting with verse 18. Verses 18–23 each begin with what's called the *waw* conjunctive (like our word "and") followed by a different word than "nakedness" (*erwat*); also, instead of the consistent use of the negative (*lo*) plus the verb "uncover" (*tegalleh*, from the root *galah*), as in 7–17, here the negative particles are used before verbs other than *uncover*. Why are these contrasts important? In verses 6–17, we're dealing with *kinship bonds* while verses 18–23 address prohibited sexual relations *outside of kinship bonds*.

Furthermore, the key word in 18:18 is *sarar*—that is, "to make a rival wife." The same word in noun form (*sarah*) is also found in 1 Samuel 1:6, the story of Elkanah and his wife Hannah and the "rival" wife Peninnah. Hannah and Peninnah weren't biological sisters, just two female Israelite citizens (or "sisters"). This fits what we find in the non-kinship section of Leviticus 18. So this law in 18:18, then, explicitly prohibits the taking of a second (rival) wife in addition to the first—the interpretation taken by the Qumran (Dead Sea scrolls) community, established in the second century BC.⁶

One final point here: the wording of 18:18 (literally, “a woman to her sister”) itself indicates that this is not a literal sister. This phrase “a woman to her sister” and its counterpart, “a man to his brother,” are used twenty times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and never do they refer to a literal sister or brother. Rather, they are idioms for “one in addition to another.” So this verse doesn’t refer to incest; rather, it refers to the addition of another wife to the first (i.e., polygamy).

What then about other instances in Scripture that seem to endorse polygamy? God forbids it in Leviticus 18:18, yet people practiced it in Israel. Of course, the same could be said about many prohibited practices: idolatry, infant sacrifice, oppressing the poor, and so on. Yet some will argue that polygamy is implied or even divinely encouraged in certain passages. So let’s explore some of these texts.

Servant Girl as Prospective Wife: Exodus 21:7–11

If a man sells his daughter as a servant [‘*amah*], she is not to go free as menservants do. If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself [i.e., he refuses to go through with a possible engagement], he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. (Exod. 21:7–11 NIV)

As we’ve seen earlier, this is another example of case law (casuistic law).⁷ Such regulations don’t assume that the described states of affairs are ideal. Case law begins with specific examples that don’t necessarily present best-case scenarios: “if two men quarrel” or “if someone strikes a man” are examples of case law. So the law here instructs Israelites about what should be done under certain inferior conditions (“*If* a man sells his daughter . . .”). But we’ll see that even if conditions are less than ideal, the goal is to protect women in unfortunate circumstances. Later on, we’ll come back to this passage in the context of Israelite servanthood (slavery).

We’re left to wonder: “What kind of father would *sell* his daughter?” Actually, when a father sells his daughter, he’s doing so out of economic desperation, as we’ll see later on in the chapters on servanthood, which is more like contracted employment. In fact, the father is doing this out of concern for his family, and Israel’s laws provided a safety net for its very poorest. Voluntary selling was a matter of survival in harsh financial circumstances. Temporarily contracting out family members to employers, who also provided room and board, was the most suitable alternative during hard times. Safety nets shouldn’t become hammocks, and a typical servant tried to work off the terms of his contract and become debt free.

As far as the marriageable daughter goes, a father would do his best to care for her as well. Here, he is trying to help his daughter find security in marriage; the father would arrange for a man with means to marry her.

Some people will argue, “Look, the man has a *son*. Therefore, he must be married, and so he’s looking into the possibility of getting a *second* wife, maybe to produce children if his first wife is barren. So we have implicit support of polygamy here, don’t we?”

This conclusion is too quick, however. It goes beyond the evidence. Two obvious options present themselves: (1) the man’s first wife died; or (2) the man and his first wife divorced. Let’s not forget that the son was of marriageable age—typically, in his twenties (as was the girl). So whether the man takes this young servant woman to be his wife or the wife of his son, we still have no polygamy either way.

Furthermore, this particular passage involves some issues in translation. The Hebrew text of verse 8 indicates that the man decides not to take the servant girl as his wife. In verses 9–10, two other possibilities arise: (1) the man (whether widowed or divorced) might give her to his son, or—and this is the tricky part—(2) he “marries another woman.” Some suggest that this is an endorsement of polygamy: the man takes the servant girl *and* marries another woman in addition. But this is a misreading. We’re already told in verse 8 that the man doesn’t choose to take the servant woman as his wife. In that case, we should understand verse 10 to mean that he marries another *instead of* the servant woman.

Then what of the “marital rights” the man owes her? Doesn’t this also sound like polygamy here? The problem with the translation “marital rights” (‘*onah*’) is this: it’s a stab in the dark with a term *used only once* in the Old Testament. Words occurring once can often be tricky to handle, and translators should tread carefully. Some scholars have suggested more likely possibilities. For example, this word could be related to a word for oil (or possibly ointments); the servant girl should be sent out with three basic necessities: food, clothing, and oil.

However, an even more plausible rendering is available. The root of the word is associated with the idea of habitation or dwelling (*ma'on, me'onah*); for example, “God is a dwelling place,” or heaven is God’s holy “dwelling place” (Deut. 33:27; 2 Chron. 30:27). We can more confidently conclude that quarters or shelter (though possibly oil) are in view here, not conjugal rights. So the servant girl should be guaranteed the basic necessities: food, clothing, and lodging/shelter. So we’re not even talking about polygamy here, let alone some implied support of it.

To review, the three issues here are:

1. If the man rejects the servant woman as a wife, she is to be given her freedom (redeemed/bought back).
2. If his son wants to marry her, she’s to be taken in as a family member and treated as a daughter.
3. If the man marries another woman, the servant woman is to receive food, clothing, and lodging.

Although we’ll touch on this passage again (in light of Deut. 15), I think we can set aside the polygamy question as far as Exodus 21 is concerned.

David: 2 Samuel 12:8

Allegedly, God’s own commentary here (through Nathan the prophet) suggests an endorsement of polygamy. After David’s power-rape of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah, God tells David, “I also gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your care . . . ; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these” (2 Sam. 12:8). Isn’t God graciously providing multiple wives for David?

We should be careful about reading too much into the word *gave*. After all, the same word is used in 2 Samuel 12:11: “Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes, and *give* them to your companion.” Certainly God didn’t demonstrate his approval of polygamy by “giving” David’s wives over to his treacherous son Absalom.

Furthermore, the “master” mentioned in 12:8 is Saul. The sentence indicating that God “gave” Saul’s “house” and “wives” to David is probably a general reference to the transfer of Saul’s estate to the new monarch, David. If David took Saul’s wife Ahinoam (1 Sam. 14:50) to be his own, this would be in violation of levitical law: Ahinoam was the mother of Michal, whom Saul gave to David as a wife, and Leviticus 18:17 forbids marrying one’s mother-in-law. So this passage hardly lends support to God’s endorsement of polygamy.

The Unloved Wife: Deuteronomy 21:15–17

If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn. But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn. (Deut. 21:15–17)

What does this legislation do? It helps protect against favoritism. The firstborn’s inheritance shouldn’t be withdrawn just because his mother happens to be the unfavored wife.

Does this passage slyly endorse polygamy? Not at all. “If a man has two wives . . .” is an example of case law. It doesn’t necessarily endorse a practice but gives guidance for when a particular situation arises. For example, Exodus 22:1 states, “If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.” This law isn’t advocating stealing! It offers guidance in unfortunate circumstances—namely, when a theft takes place.

Similarly, in Matthew 19, Jesus is questioned about Deuteronomy 24:1, which begins, “When [if] a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house . . .” Jesus tells his questioners that Moses didn’t *command* this legislation (which was to protect a divorced woman from the whim of her husband, who later decides he wants her back); rather, he *permitted* it because of human hard-heartedness (Matt. 19:8).

Also, some scholars suggest that Deuteronomy 21:15–17 doesn’t state that both wives are living and in the same house. The verb form of “has” suggests that the man may have remarried after his first wife’s death.⁸

Let's try to wrap up the polygamy question by summarizing the appropriate response to polygamy in the Old Testament:

- The Old Testament makes clear the ideal built into creation. In Genesis 2:24, note the singular “wife” as well as “father and mother.”
- Leviticus 18:18 expresses strong disapproval for polygamy, even if this law wasn't always carried out.
- The biblical writers hoped for better behavior.
- Some scholars have suggested that polygamy may have been tolerated for the practical reason that its prohibition would have been difficult to enforce.
- From Lamech's wives to those of Abraham, Esau, Jacob, David, and Solomon, wherever we see God's ideal of monogamy ignored, we witness strife, competition, and disharmony. The Old Testament presents polygamy as not only undesirable but also a violation of God's standards. Old Testament narratives subtly critique this marital arrangement.
- God warns the one most likely to be polygamous—Israel's king: “He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away” (Deut. 17:17).
- God himself models covenant love for his people; this ideal union of marital faithfulness between husband and wife is one without competition.

The advice of Proverbs 5:15–18 is the presumed standard. A man should find delight and sexual satisfaction with his wife in monogamous marriage: “Drink . . . fresh water from your own well” (v. 15).

The Bride-Price

The idea of bride-price is presented by the New Atheists as though it's a matter of buying a wife like you would a horse or a mule. In actual fact, the bride-price was the way a man showed his serious intentions toward his bride-to-be, and it was a way of bringing two families together to discuss a serious, holy, and lifelong matter. Having sex with a young woman without the necessary preparations and formal ceremony cheapened the woman and sexuality. The process surrounding the bride-price reflected the honorable state of marriage.

Think of the dowry system used in places like India. In this case, the family of the bride-to-be gives money to the future husband's family. Such a transaction hardly means that the groom-to-be is mere property! Why automatically conclude that a *woman* is property because this marriage gift is given in the Old Testament but that a *man* isn't property under the dowry system?

The bride-price was more like a deposit from the groom's father to the bride's father. The Hebrew word for this deposit (*mohar*) is better translated “marriage gift.” It not only helped create closer family ties between the two families but also provided economic stability for a marriage. This gift given to the bride's father (often several years' worth of wages) compensated him for the work his daughter would otherwise have contributed to the family. The marriage gift—preserved by the husband throughout the marriage—also served as security for the wife in case of divorce or her husband's death.⁹ In fact, the bride's father would often give an even larger gift of property when the couple married. Hitchens's complaint about the Old Testament's bride-price is misguided.

Was Rape Allowed?

Some critics say that the law of Moses permits the rape of women or may condemn rape but with little concern for the victim's well-being. We should note two related passages. The first is Exodus 22:16–17:

If a man seduces [*patah*] a virgin who is not engaged, and lies with her, he must pay a dowry for her to be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the dowry for virgins.

Extending and expanding on the discussion of Exodus 22:16–17, Deuteronomy 22:23–29 (which can be divided into three portions) reads this way:

If there is a girl who is a virgin engaged to a man, and another man finds her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death; the girl, because she did not cry out in the city [i.e., where her screams could be heard], and the man, because he has violated his neighbor's wife. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. (vv. 23–24)

But if in the field [i.e., where the girl doesn't have much chance to be heard] the man finds the girl who is engaged, and the man forces [*chazaq*] her and lies with her, then only the man who lies with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the girl; there is no sin in the girl worthy of death, for just as a man rises against his neighbor and murders him, so is this case. When he found her in the field, the engaged girl cried out, but there was no one to save her. (vv. 25–27)

If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes [*tapas*—“takes/catches”—a weaker verb than “forces” in v. 25] her and lies with her and they are discovered, then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days. (vv. 28–29)

Upon closer inspection, the context emphasizes the *protection* of women, not the insignificance of women. We should first distinguish among three scenarios in the Deuteronomy 22 passage:

1. adultery between two consenting adults—a man and an engaged woman (v. 23), which is a violation of marriage (“he has violated his neighbor's wife”)
2. the forcible rape of an engaged woman (v. 25), whose innocence is assumed
3. the seduction of an unengaged woman (v. 28), an expansion on the seduction passage of Exodus 22:16–17

In each case, the *man* is guilty. However, the critics' argument focuses on verses 28–29: the rape victim is being treated like she is her father's property. She's been violated, and the rapist gets off by paying a bridal fee. No concern is shown for the girl at all. In fact, she's apparently forced to marry the man who raped her! Are these charges warranted?

Regarding verses 28–29, various scholars see Exodus 22:16–17 as the backdrop to this scenario. Both passages are variations on the same theme. Even if there is some pressure from the man, the young woman is complicit; though initially pressured (seduced), she doesn't act against her will. The text says “*they* are discovered” (v. 28), not “*he* is discovered.”¹⁰ Both are culpable. Technically, this pressure/seduction could not be called forcible rape, falling under our contemporary category of statutory rape. Though the woman gave in, the man here would bear the brunt of the responsibility.

As it would have been more difficult for a woman to find a husband had she been sexually involved with another before marriage, her bride-price—a kind of economic security for her future—would have been in jeopardy. The man guilty of statutory rape *seduced* the unengaged woman; he wasn't a dark-alley rapist whom the young woman tried to fight off or from whom she tried to run away. This passage is far from being demeaning to women.

Both passages suggest two courses of action:

1. If the father and daughter agree to it, the seducer must marry the woman and provide for her all her life, without the possibility of divorce. The father (in conjunction with the daughter) has the final say-so in the arrangement. The girl isn't required to marry the seducer.
2. The girl's father (the legal point person) has the right to refuse any such permanent arrangement as well as the right to demand the payment that would be given for a bride, even though the seducer doesn't marry his daughter (since she has been sexually compromised, marriage to another man would be difficult if not impossible). The girl has to agree with this arrangement, and she isn't required to marry the seducer. In this arrangement, she is still treated as a virgin.¹¹

Again, we don't see a lack of concern for the woman. Her well-being is actually the underlying theme of this legislation.

Women POWs as War Booty?

How amazing it would be to live in a war-free world. Although lately many Western democracies have been fairly free from the traumas and devastation of war, warfare in the ancient Near East was a way of life. (We'll say more on this in future chapters.) War brought with it certain unavoidable realities in the ancient world, and ancient Near Eastern peoples had different ways of “minimizing” the effects of war. One concern was prisoners of war (POWs). In the wake of battle, the problem arose: What was to be done with survivors?

Let's look at two texts that deal with foreign female POWs: Deuteronomy 20 and 21. We'll deal with them in reverse order.

Deuteronomy 21:10–14

When you go out to battle against your enemies, and the Lord your God delivers them into your hands and you take them away captive, and see among the captives a beautiful woman, and have a desire for her and would take her as a wife for yourself, then you shall bring her home to your house, and she shall shave her head and trim her nails. She shall also remove the clothes of her captivity and shall remain in your house, and mourn her father and mother a full month; and after that you may go in to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife. It shall be, if you are not pleased with her, then you shall let her go wherever she wishes; but you shall certainly not sell her for money, you shall not mistreat her, because you have humbled her. (Deut. 21:10–14)

In this scenario, the law served as a protective measure for the woman POW. She was the one who benefited from this legislation. The law defended her rights and personhood. For one thing, she wasn't raped, which was common practice in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The would-be Israelite husband couldn't simply marry—let alone have sex with—her immediately. No, she was to be treated as a full-fledged wife. Unlike many Las Vegas weddings or the phenomenon of mail-order brides, the matter of marriage in Israel was not entered into lightly (motivated by, say, lust). That point is strongly reinforced in this passage.

The separation process allowed for a period of reflection. Before a woman POW was taken as a wife by the victorious Israelite soldier, she was allowed a transition period to make an outer and inner break from her past way of life. Only after this could she be taken as a wife. Given the seriousness of marital commitment, the time period allowed for the man to change his mind. The line “if you are not pleased with her” doesn't suggest something trivial, however, since the Mosaic law took seriously the sanctity of marriage.¹² If, for some reason, the man's attitude changed, the woman had to be set free.

Deuteronomy 20:13–14

When the Lord your God gives it [i.e., the city which has rejected Israel's terms of peace] into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword. Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself. (Deut. 20:13–14)

We'll discuss warfare later. For now, the concern is the well-being of captured women and children. Although rape was a common feature in ancient Near Eastern warfare, Israelite soldiers were prohibited from raping women, contrary to what some crassly argue. Sex was permitted only within the bounds of marital commitment, a repeated theme laid out in the Mosaic law. Rape in warfare wasn't a grand exception to the requirement of sexual fidelity.

As with Deuteronomy 21:10–14, the scenario is the same—namely, a soldier's taking a wife. Rather than being outcasts or the low woman on the totem pole, women captured in war could become integrated into Israelite society through marriage. Understandably, it was far less likely that *men* would have been as readily integrated into Israel's life and ways.¹³

Deuteronomy 25:11–12: An Offhanded Excursus

If two men, a man and his countryman, are struggling together, and the wife of one comes near to deliver her husband from the hand of the one who is striking him, and puts out her hand and seizes his genitals, then you shall cut off her hand; you shall not show pity. (Deut. 25:11–12)

This passage refers to “the immodest lady wrestler,” as one scholar humorously put it. Her action was considered a shameful act, and, what's worse, the man could possibly be permanently injured and thus deprived of future children. At first blush, this passage apparently requires that a woman's hand be cut off if she seizes the genitals of a man fighting with her husband.

Now, if this *were* the case, it would be the *only* biblical instance of punishment by mutilation; beyond this, where ancient Near Eastern laws call for bodily mutilation for various offenses, the Mosaic law does not. Before we explore the text in more detail, we should compare this to other fearsome punishments in the ancient Near East. As we've seen, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi insisted that certain crimes be punished by cutting off the tongue, breast, hand, or ear—or the accused being dragged around a field by cattle. The law of Moses, though not ideal, presents a remarkable improvement when it comes to punishments.

A more plausible interpretation of this passage is the punishment of *depilation* (“you shall shave [the hair of] her groin”), not *mutilation*. The word commonly translated “hand” (*kaph*) can refer to the “palm” of a hand or some rounded concave object like a dish, bowl, or spoon, or even the arch of a foot. The commonly used word for “hand” (*yad*) isn’t used here. It would be strange to cut off the palm of a hand!

Furthermore, in certain places in the Old Testament, the word *kaph* is clearly used for the pelvic area—either the concave hip socket (Gen. 32:26, 32) or the curve of the woman’s groin area: “I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles [plural: *kaphot*] of the lock” (Song of Songs 5:5 NIV). This language alludes back to the “locked garden” in 4:12: “You are a locked garden, my sister, my bride; you are an enclosed spring, a sealed-up fountain” (NET). Scholars generally agree that the garden language is a metaphor for a woman’s sexual organs, and its being “locked” implies her purity/virginity.¹⁴

Also, in the Deuteronomy 25 text, there is no indication of physical harm to the man (as some commentators commonly assume). For those who assume a literal “hand for a hand” punishment, remember that the man’s hand *hasn’t* been injured or cut off (if so, then the idea of cutting off her hand would make slightly more sense). In addition, shaving hair—including pubic hair—as a humiliating punishment was practiced in Babylon and Sumer (see also 2 Sam. 10:4–5; Isa. 7:20). This isn’t mutilation for mutilation, but humiliation for humiliation.

In addition, the specific Hebrew *qal* verb form (in Deut. 25:12) has a milder connotation than the stronger, intensified *piel* verb form, meaning “cut off” or “(physically) sever [*qatsats*].” Whenever it appears in this milder form (Jer. 9:26; 25:23; 49:32), it means “clip/cut/shave [hair].” There’s just no linguistic reason to translate the weaker verb form (“shave”) as a stronger form (i.e., amputation). In this particular case, we’re talking about the open concave region of the groin, and thus a shaving of pubic hair. In short, the woman’s punishment is public humiliation for publicly humiliating the man—something still very severe and for which no mercy was to be shown. From a textual point of view, the superior view is clearly the “shaving” view, not the mutilation view.¹⁵

Is this an ideal punishment for all time? Not at all! However, it does stand out in marked contrast to the severe and excessive mutilation punishments common in the ancient Near East. In fact, Middle Assyrian laws (around 1100 BC) present a similar scenario (in the case of injury to the man), though with far more drastic consequences. If a woman in a quarrel injured a man’s testicle, her finger was cut off. If the other testicle was injured, both of her eyes were gouged out.¹⁶ Again, even if Deuteronomy 25 *were* dealing with an actual mutilation punishment, this would be (1) the only such punishment in the Mosaic law and (2) a dramatic contrast to the frequent mutilation punishments in the rest of the ancient Near East. But as we’ve seen, the language simply does not allow for this “amputation” rendering.

Israel’s laws weren’t perfect, to be sure. But when we compare them with various ancient Near Eastern law codes (whether regarding sexuality or other matters), the general impression noted by scholars is a range of dramatic—even radical—moral improvements in Israel.

Further Reading

Davidson, Richard M. *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007.

Jones, Clay. “Why We Don’t Hate Sin so We Don’t Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to ‘Divine Genocide’ Arguments.” *Philosophia Christi* n.s. 11 (2009): 53–72.

Wenham, Gordon J. *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narratives Ethically*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000.