

Was the God of the Old Testament Immoral?¹

by Steven James

Atheists will often insist that the God of the Bible behaved immorally toward some races of people, that Scripture itself is evidence that God is a heartless murderer. Unbelievers lay claim to a moral superiority over God. They argue that He acted maliciously when He condoned, and even ordered, the deaths of whole societies of men, women, and children.

Here, we will explore the ethical questions that relate to God's involvement in such apparent oppression. Just how do faithful, obedient believers reconcile an all-loving, all-powerful God of righteousness with His demand that many Canaanite lives be destroyed?

Atheist, Richard Dawkins wrote: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction: jealous – and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak, vindictive, blood-thirsty, an ethnic cleanser, a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal [deliberately murdering own child], pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic capriciously malevolent bully” (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*).

Something that we cannot do when defending the Bible is to deny what is plainly written. So, is it true that approximately 1,650 years after Creation, after God initially said that everything was “good,” that the human race had become so degenerate that God sent a worldwide Flood to destroy millions of people including innocent children? Indeed, He did.

As we consider this subject a little further, it should become apparent that God did not do so without just cause. But before we answer this, we must ask ourselves whether the atheist has any grounds or credibility on which to stand in the matter.

The unbeliever maintains that God is immoral. But when we ask him or her: “What do you mean by moral or immoral?” they have absolutely no basis upon which to take an ethical stance. They may immediately respond, “Well, some things are just right while others are simply wrong” which might sound perfectly reasonable on the surface.

Based on the implications of atheistic humanism, materialism, and evolution, the unbeliever will stress time and time again that morality is actually only relative; that ultimately, there is no absolute right or wrong. That’s because, in the absence

¹ Butt, Kyle. “Why Did God Order Babies to be Killed?”, House to House, Heart to Heart, YouTube.com Feb. 27, 2013.

of a righteous God, there is absolutely no foundation for moral ethics. Everything, no matter how depraved, is morally subjective, based on one's own interpretation. Now, simple common sense tells us that this is not true. That is, some things *are* absolutely right while others *are* absolutely wrong.

One prominent atheist has suggested, "There are no actions, in and of themselves, that are always absolutely right; it depends on the context. You cannot name an action that is always absolutely right or wrong, I can think of an exception in every case" (Dan Barker, *Barker-Paine Debate*).

Let's reflect on that idea for a moment. Didn't the atheist just tell us that God is immoral for causing the deaths of innocent children, and yet, at the same time argue that "[there's] an exception in every case"?

If we ask the unbeliever: "Could there be times when it is right to kill an innocent child?" their answer might be, "Well, perhaps, if it was for some greater good." So, we might then ask, "If someone had their finger on the button of a nuclear weapon that would destroy millions of people, would their demand that 100 people be executed to save millions be justified?" Again, their answer would likely be, "Unfortunately, yes." Once again, they are admitting that it is morally right to kill innocent human beings "under certain circumstances."

This leads to another, similar question: "Are there times when innocent children must be killed?" Based on moral relativism, what is the atheist forced to concede? Only this: "There's an exception in every case."

So, is it possible that an all-loving, all-powerful, omniscient God could be an exception? The simple fact is, using the atheist's line of reasoning, he or she cannot claim that God is immoral for passing judgment on people under certain circumstances. Moral relativism demands that no one can admit that any action is either morally right or morally wrong.

Charles Darwin once wrote, "A man who has no assured and ever present belief in the existence of a personal god, or the future existence of retribution and reward, can have for a goal of life, as far as I can see, only to follow those impulses and instincts which are the strongest or which seem the best ones to him" (Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*).

Darwin admits that if you don't believe in God, the best course of action is to do what you think best. He cannot understand how anyone could do otherwise. However, if such were the case, then all of our society would eventually collapse into anarchy, every man and woman for themselves. The Old Testament Book of Judges chronicles these very conditions.

Moreover, an unrepentant serial murderer might believe that since we're nothing more than "pond scum" or "random molecules in chemical suspension," it makes little difference what injury one person inflicts on another. And, if there are no moral consequences for our actions, how could we argue otherwise? If one believes there is no God to which he or she will be held accountable, why should they modify their behavior for the sake of society?

Now, we all know that such a stance, that of allowing innocent people to be killed without just cause is woefully unethical. But this is the logical implication of most atheistic philosophy taken to its inevitable extreme.

Once the atheist admits that some things are morally right while others are morally wrong, they have just pulled the rug out from under their argument. That's because once you admit to one moral value – just one – you have just undermined the concept of atheism. Atheism based on moral relativism cannot survive in the face of objective moral values.

Therefore, when the atheist contends that God is immoral for some of His decisions, he or she has absolutely no basis upon which to state their case. They have nowhere to turn in order to claim moral superiority.

Leviticus 18:21-24

Something that everyone needs to understand is that, in the Old Testament, much of the killing that God ordered was based on the judgment of those who were guilty of heinous crimes. The balance of the 18th chapter of the Book of Leviticus warns of the punishment that God intended to render. Speaking to the Israelites He said:

"And you shall not let any of your descendants pass through the fire to Molech ... Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you" (Lev. 18:21-24).

God's perfect justice required retribution against the sinful behavior of the Canaanite civilization. The Canaanites were an aggressive race of people that engaged in some of the most egregious behavior imaginable. Their debauchery extended to acts of incest, homosexuality, prostitution, and bestiality; they even burned their children to idols. Every form of deviance was common among the Canaanites, to the point that God proclaimed, *"the land has vomited its inhabitants"* (Lev. 18:25, 28).

While much of the language used in Leviticus 18 is too graphic to quote here, suffice it to say that God was judging them by the many abominations they had committed. He gave them more than sufficient time (over 400 years) to repent of

their evil. They had reached the full measure of their sin, just as God had foretold Abram centuries before (Abraham, cf. Genesis 15:13-16).

Jeremiah 32:35

In the Book of Jeremiah, we again read of these atrocities: “[*The Canaanites*] built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin” (Jer. 32:35).

Who would deny that if anyone deserved death, it would be those who routinely sacrificed children to a non-existent god in such a horrific manner? Most reasonable people would understand this was a just sentence for a corrupt culture.

Another well-publicized author of the atheistic community states the following: “Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them. This may seem an extraordinary claim, but it merely announces an ordinary fact about the world in which we live. Certain beliefs place their adherents beyond the reach of every peaceful means of persuasion while inspiring them to commit acts of extraordinary violence against others. There is, in fact, no talking to such people” (Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*).

In other words, some people’s beliefs are so dangerous, writes Harris, that they don’t even have to act on them. We can simply consider killing that person for believing what they choose to believe and that would be an ethical decision.

So the atheist complains that “God is immoral for killing people!” then turns around and states that some people should be killed for their personal beliefs. Let’s understand that:

- 1) An atheist cannot make a moral judgment based on moral relativism;
- 2) Atheists admit that there were lots of people in the Bible that were killed because they deserved such harsh punishment for their atrocities.

Now, to be clear, Harris is referring to radical Islamic terrorists. So if you ask a terrorist if it’s okay to kill “infidels” and they respond “Yes.” it is then okay to execute them (terrorists) before they’ve murdered anyone. Nonetheless, Harris is admitting that, indeed, it might be ethical to kill some people.

Is it therefore possible for God to pass ethical, mortal judgment on some nations of the Old Testament, intimately aware of their habitual heinous acts? One of the authors mentioned previously admits that some people in the Old Testament deserved death:

“Maybe some of those men were guilty of committing war crimes. And maybe

some of them were justifiably guilty ... of committing some kind of crimes. But the children? The fetuses?" (Dan Barker, *Barker-Paine Debate*).

Barker has here conceded that it's possible that some of those people deserved to die. But he maintains that children and the unborn didn't deserve it. The implication is that atheists are morally superior to believers because they feel that causing the deaths of children is immoral. Certainly, the faithful do.

But wait just a second. It is a documented and reasonably well-known fact that many atheists have no problem killing children. This is especially clear when analyzing their writing. Unbelievers have absolutely no problem whatsoever in this regard; they often advocate the killing of the unborn. In 2008, atheist Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, called contemporary atheist, Peter Singer, "the leading ethicist in the world."

Peter Singer writes: "If we compare a severely defective human infant with a nonhuman animal, a dog or a pig, for example, we'll often find the nonhuman to have a superior capacity. Only the fact that the defective infant is a member of the species homo sapiens, do we believe that it should be treated differently than the dog or pig. Species membership alone, however, is not morally relevant... If we can put aside the obsolete and erroneous notion of the sanctity of all human life, we may start to look at human life as it really is..." (Singer, *Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life*, 1983).

In other words, the only difference between a human baby, a dog, and a pig, is the sad fact that one of them is *a person*: "species membership is not morally relevant." Singer continues: "That a fetus is known to be disabled is widely accepted as grounds for abortion. Yet in discussing abortion, we say that birth does not mark a morally significant dividing line. I cannot see how you can defend the view that a fetus may be 'replaced' before birth, but newborn infants may not" (Ibid.).

So, what has the atheist suggested that we have the right to kill? A "fetus," an unborn child. As well, he is not only telling us that it's okay to kill a fetus, but that it is similarly acceptable to kill that same child a day after it is born – **a live child!**

Christianity views the sanctity of human life as a God-given imperative. We are all made in God's image and are therefore not merely the equivalent of a dog or pig as some suggest. Some atheists don't believe that infanticide is a "significant dividing line." So just who, in this argument, has taken the moral high ground?

Singer further contends that, "If disabled newborn infants were not regarded as having a right to life until, say, a week or a month after birth, it would allow parents, in consultation with their doctor, to choose on the basis of far greater

knowledge of the infant's condition than is possible before birth" (Singer, *Writings of an Ethical Life*, p. 193).

Our modern society aborts children at eight months. But Singer suggests that, if after weeks or months, a child is not developing to its parent's satisfaction, or is deficient in some way, we might just decide to "replace it," that is, kill it. Singer continues: "Nevertheless the main point is clear: killing a disabled infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person. Very often it is not wrong at all" (Singer, *Ibid.*)

In his book *Created from Animals, The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (p. 189-190), James Rachels writes:

"An infant with severe brain damage, even if it survives for many years, may never learn to speak, and its mental powers may never rise above a primitive level. In fact, its psychological capacities may be markedly inferior to those of a typical rhesus monkey. In that case, moral individualism would see no reason to prefer its life over the monkey's. ... Some unfortunate humans – perhaps because they have suffered brain damage – are not rational agents. What are we to say about them? The natural conclusion, according to the doctrine we're considering, would be that their status is that of mere animals. And, perhaps we should go on to conclude that they should be used as non-human animals are used – perhaps as laboratory subjects, or as food" (Rachels, *Created from Animals*). As food?!

Upon what basis does atheism have the right to call God immoral?

For an atheist to attempt to stand on "higher moral ground" given this type of reasoning is insidious and absurd. What we're saying here is that the atheistic community has absolutely no problem killing the innocent. So, before we allow them to challenge God's moral authority, it behooves us to have them first question their own beliefs, to hold their feet to the fire and to set the record straight.

What is the difference between the God of the Bible ordering or bringing about the deaths of someone, including innocent children, and the immoral, atheistic stance of killing the unborn or murdering mentally and physically impaired children?

There is an enormous difference. Once again, we quote author Dan Barker:

"Since this is the only life we atheists have, each decision is crucial and we are accountable for actions right now... Life is dear. It is fleeting. It is vibrant and vulnerable. It is heart-breaking. It can be lost. It will be lost. But we exist now. We are caring, intelligent animals and can treasure our brief lives" (Dan Barker, *Godless*, 2008).

The atheistic community maintains that the one thing a human being may call its

own is its human life, that's it. That's the total of anyone's entire possession. According to Barker and his contemporaries, there's no afterlife, no retribution, no punishment and no reward; this life is all there is.

Based on this belief, when someone kills an unborn child or even one that's only weeks or months old, what exactly is being taken from that child? **Everything.** The child's right to human existence, all the child has known or ever will know, is forever extinguished.

Fundamentally, atheism is bereft of all hope. It offers no promise of immortality and inexorably leads people to a future of futility and meaninglessness. However, as one views these same circumstances from a biblical perspective, the prospect is considerably brighter. Is it true that this life is all there is?

Hardly. There is a mountain of evidence, based on the Books: Genesis through Revelation, to conclude that it is not – not by a long shot. The faithful understand that this life is only the beginning of the story.

Matthew 16:26

“For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matt. 16:26).

The quote from Matthew's Gospel tells us there is something much more valuable than this finite life: our eternal soul. And when we think this way, we understand that at conception, God has instilled a soul within a human body, a soul that will live forever. The Lord's brother James asks us to consider this carefully:

James 4:14

“Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes [away].” (Jas. 4:14, NIV).

Our life on planet earth is brief and fleeting. But according to the biblical perspective, when God takes the life of a child, that child has **immortality** with which to look forward. So, is it true that biblically, death is sometimes preferable to human existence? Indeed it is:

Isaiah 57:1-2

*“The righteous perishes, and no man takes it to heart; merciful men are taken away, while **no one considers that the righteous is taken away from evil. He shall enter into peace; they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness**”* (Isa. 57:1-2).

To those of us who remain in this world, it's often very sad when a righteous person must depart. But would that same person, living in a paradise greater than we can imagine *ever* wish to trade places with us on earth? It is very likely that, not only are the righteous never coming back, they would never again *wish to* return!

Psalm 116:15

Further, let us consider what the Psalmist has to say about those who have departed from this world:

***“Precious in the sight of the LORD
Is the death of His godly ones”*** (Ps. 116:15).

Atheists would immediately respond: “Now hold on just a minute! You mean to say that God views as *precious*, the deaths of the righteous people?!” Absolutely. “Why? How could that be possible?”

2 Timothy 4:7

As the apostle Paul wrote his final letter to his beloved protégé, Timothy: ***“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing”*** (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

Paul relates that as we reach the end of our journey in this world, our *real life* is about to begin! In God's Mind, is that good for us? The faithful will recognize that it is. Paul similarly encouraged the saints at Philippi:

Philippians 1:21, 23

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ... But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better;” (Phil. 1:21, 23).

Here, the apostle is clearly stating that it is far better to live with Christ than to remain in this world of sin and death. A clever cynic may respond: “Well, if that's the case, why not simply kill all children? Why not wait until the moment a person has been baptized, then shoot them so they will immediately ascend into paradise?”

There is a very straightforward response to such questions. Who is the ultimate Arbiter of human life? Who is the only Sovereign Being allowed to decide when a person's life will come to an end? Only an omniscient God can do that.

When little children die, they are destined for heaven. The false doctrine of “Original Sin” maintains that we are all born sinful. Martin Luther went so far as to state that if a child was not baptized after birth, and he or she lost their precious life, they would be consigned to hell forever. But this false doctrine has no basis in Scripture.

Ezekiel 18:20

A passage from the Book of Ezekiel speaks directly to this matter: *“The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself”* (Ez. 18:20).

The Bible tells us that innocent children are born without sin. They do not “inherit” anyone else’s sin, and that includes Adam and Eve. It is an egregious error to believe that innocent children are condemned. In the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 18), Jesus held a small child before His disciples and said:

Matthew 18:3

“Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3).

There is absolutely no hint that small children bear any responsibility whatsoever. Indeed, Christ stated that the greatest in heaven are those with an innocent, child-like disposition.

Most have probably heard the story of Job. In the Book that bears his name, that righteous patriarch begged to die. He felt that death would be preferable to his wretched condition. He cursed the day he was born. Satan had inflicted him physically to the extent that his skin was black and flaking off of his bones. He had boils from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. He was suffering in the town dump, scraping off those worm-infested boils with a piece of broken pottery. He was so disfigured that his lifelong friends couldn’t recognize him. And when they did, they were so appalled at his condition that they could not speak a word to him for seven days. Yet despite his woeful circumstances, Job understood that only God has the prerogative to give life and to take it away.

One atheist is quoted as saying, “Morality is simply acting with the intention to minimize harm...” He further contends that the way to avoid making moral mistakes is to “be as informed as possible about the likely consequences of the actions

being considered” (Dan Barker, *Godless*, p. 187). Or, to paraphrase Barker, the means by which to act morally is to be fully informed of the situation.

Well, who knows more about any given situation than an all-knowing God? According to the atheist’s own reasoning, the means by which we can make a proper moral decision is to assess every likely consequence. The One Who can do that is in the most favorable position to make a perfectly moral, purely righteous decision.

Well, believers have Someone like that. We have a God who possesses an intimate knowledge of everything that *has* ever happened, and One Who knows everything that *will* ever happen – along with the foresight to understand every possible action that could ever take place. Who, then, possesses the moral authority to know when a human life should be spared and when it is to end?

Only the God of the Bible meets all of these criteria.

We should appreciate the fact that there is absolutely nothing that our Father in heaven does not know. And only He has the prerogative of terminating a life that He gave to us in the first place. Everything we own – including our lives – belongs to God. He owns the air we breathe, the earth beneath our feet and the water and food that we consume. There is absolutely no one else that can ever decide when our lives will come to an end.

Ecclesiastes 12:5-7

“...*For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street. Remember Him ... [for] then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it*” (Ecc. 12:5-7).

When we reflect on the lives of the Canaanite children, the ones that the atheist claims God so immorally murdered in the Old Testament, those children instantly entered eternal life. Would any of those children exchange a life of paradise for an ungodly, disgusting life in a corrupt Canaanite society? Is it really immoral for God to take someone’s human life and replace it with immortality? Clearly not. Not after all of the facts have been weighed and considered.

When someone believes that this life is all there is, that since there’s no reward and no punishment in an afterlife, any behavior becomes acceptable: morality no longer applies. As the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky observed, “If God is dead, then all things are permissible.” Ultimately, without rules or laws, there can be no absolute right or wrong, and there can be no sense of justice or decency in the world. But there is, and we should understand that we will be held to account for it.

God remains the all-perfect, absolutely moral, righteous Judge over the earth.
And, He offers eternal life in paradise to those who trust and obey Him.