

The Defining Characteristic of the New Atheists

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Paul Copan opens his book *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* by introducing the concept of the “New Atheists.” Copan cites Gallup polls to argue that the overall number of atheists in America is not increasing. Rather, we are seeing a small group of nonbelievers “add, shall we say, ‘spice’ to the God discussion.”¹ He identifies three traits that describe the approach taken by these New Atheists. First, the manner in which they express themselves is not merely passionate, but angry.² Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale say the New Atheists “are renowned for their bullying and mocking approach toward opposing views, an attitude from an academic that makes one wonder what is really driving such an intense temperament.”³ Second, the arguments they advance against God are “surprisingly flimsy.”⁴ Finally, while they are more than willing to list off all the atrocities allegedly committed in the name of Christ, they blindly ignore the numerous vicious acts done as an outworking of atheism.⁵ For example, Sam Harris claims that “Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible.”⁶ Unfortunately for Harris, in many instances throughout the remainder of his book he advances a straw man understanding of Christian theology, begging the question of how he arrived at this alleged “theologically defensible reading

¹ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 15.

² Ibid, 16.

³ Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale, *Jesus Among Secular Gods: The Countercultural Claims of Christ* (New York: Faith Words, 2017), 2.

⁴ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 17.

⁵ Ibid, 18.

⁶ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 23.

of the Bible,” and providing a prime example of Copan’s point about the “flimsy” arguments of the New Atheists.

One common attack launched by the New Atheists is the alleged egregious immorality of God in the Old Testament. Richard Dawkins famously claimed,

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.⁷

The attacking tone of statements such as this do not, solely by the nature of that tone, give them one bit more logical plausibility. However, at least some segment of society allows themselves to be persuaded by these arguments. While Christians certainly cannot stoop to the tonal level of the New Atheists, we can and should be prepared to respond to the merits of such arguments against the Old Testament, which is what Copan sets out to do. As he explains, the New Atheist’s arguments on this front are “usually just as simplistic and uninformed here as in their general attacks on religion.”⁸ If Christians are prepared with an answer, then with the aid of the Holy Spirit we can help people recognize the inadequacy of the New Atheist positions.

⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: First Mariner, 2006), 51.

⁸ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 19.