

Is God Guilty of Divine Child Abuse?

Kenneth J. Coughlan

February 6, 2019

In chapter 5 of *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*, Paul Copan tackles the accusation that God is a bully who ordered divine child abuse when he told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and when he allowed his own son to be crucified. Copan points out that God condemned child sacrifice. In fact, he judged the Canaanites for engaging in this practice.¹ A critic could look at God's command to Abraham and accuse God of immorality or outright hypocrisy.

However, this objection fails to take into account the full context. Copan asks his readers to consider the statement, "It is wrong to kill innocent human beings."² At first glance, most people may believe this statement to be universally true, meaning it is true without exceptions. But Copan raises the examples of an ectopic pregnancy or the President's order to shoot down a hijacked plane during the September 11 attacks.³ While these are tragic scenarios, the killing of innocent lives appears morally justified in order to prevent greater harm (although in both examples, it should be noted that the innocent people being killed were going to die anyway, so these are not examples of trading a smaller number of lives in order to save a larger, which I contend presents a more problematic moral issue). Thus, given the full context, it is possible that there could be times when the taking of an innocent life is morally permissible.

This begs the question of what is the full context of God's instruction to Abraham?

Copan points out a number of factors, such as:

1. The instruction to sacrifice Isaac came from God, not another human being;

¹ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 43.

² Ibid, 49.

³ Ibid.

2. God has the ability to restore life, whereas humans do not;
3. God had promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation *through Isaac*;
and
4. God had previously provided something of a preliminary test when he instructed Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away (something that would ordinarily expose them to great risk of death) while promising to protect them.⁴

Given this background, Abraham knew that both he and Isaac would be returning. Even if God allowed the sacrifice to take place, God would restore Isaac to life.⁵ Copan proposes that the critic faces a difficult task. Given this context, are there any convincing reasons why Abraham shouldn't have obeyed God?⁶ Examined carefully, the skeptic's criticism employs circular reasoning. Only if we assume God does not exist does it become morally objectionable for Abraham to have taken Isaac up that mountain. If God does exist, and the surrounding context given by the Scriptures was in fact the information available to Abraham at the time, then he would have known beyond any reasonable doubt that Isaac was in no danger. Under those circumstances, Abraham would clearly be obligated to obey.

The authors of *Hard Sayings of the Bible* argue from God's sovereignty to explain his command. Specifically, they state, "To reject on all grounds God's legitimate right to ask for life under any conditions would be to remove his sovereignty and question his justice in providing his own sacrifice as the central work of redemption."⁷ Similarly, Norman Geisler and Thomas

⁴ Ibid, 46 - 50.

⁵ Ibid, 50.

⁶ Ibid, 50.

⁷ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Peter H. Davids, F.F. Bruce, Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 126.

Howe state, “God alone is sovereign over life ..., and therefore He alone has the right to demand when it should be taken.”⁸ However, to a skeptic this reasoning may sound unconvincing, at least standing in isolation. A critic of Christianity could say that at its core the issue is one of consistency. Yes, the Christian worldview states that God is sovereign, and on sovereignty alone God certainly could demand life whenever and for whatever reason he chooses. However, Christianity also teaches that God is love. A deity who arbitrarily opts to needlessly wipe half of all humanity from existence on a whim, purely for his own amusement, would be acting consistent with absolute sovereignty. But that would not strike most people as a loving thing to do. Thus, sovereignty, at best, is only part of the answer. The apologist must also be prepared to argue how such an action is consistent with God’s other attributes, including his love.

Copan’s argument could be expanded to achieve this end. He demonstrates that the killing of an innocent person is not always immoral per se.⁹ An argument could be made that the examples he provides involving an ectopic pregnancy and the saving of additional lives on September 11 are also acts of love. Some lives are going to be lost whichever choice is made, but it is a loving act to save those that can be saved. Thus, it is at least logically possible for God to order the killing of an innocent life consistent with his sovereignty, but for him to be acting out of love at the same time. In Abraham’s case, given that God was always in control of the situation (in that God could always stop Abraham from killing Isaac or bring Isaac back to life), the entire episode demonstrated God’s love not only for Abraham, but also for all of humanity in prefiguring and pointing toward the sacrifice of Jesus.

⁸ Norman Geisler, Thomas Howe, *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 51.

⁹ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 49.

In addition to appealing to sovereignty, Geisler and Howe also argue that “it is not morally wrong for God to order the sacrifice of our sons. . . . even our governments sometimes call upon us to sacrifice our sons for our country.”¹⁰ However, this example is not truly parallel. Governments ask us to put our children at *risk* of harm by sending them off to war. However, placing them at risk in furtherance of a greater good is not the same as deliberately executing them, as is the alleged situation with Abraham and Isaac. Thus, while other reasoning seems to adequately explain God’s command in this instance, this particular analogy is flawed.

¹⁰ Geisler, Howe, *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties*, 51.