

What Should We Make of God's Command to Sacrifice Isaac?

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Paul Copan spends two chapters of his book *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* discussing “The Bible’s Ubiquitous Weirdness.” In chapter 7, he starts out by outlining some general considerations that give us the proverbial lens through which we should be viewing the Old Testament laws. After all, much of what seems odd to us today may make more sense if we appreciate the context in which these instructions were given by God.

One factor highlighted by Copan is the fact that God’s goal was that “Israel *love* him and *cling* to him . . . , which isn’t exactly reducible to keeping laws.”¹ One point of the laws was to encourage Israel to outwardly express a grateful heart for all that God had done for them.² So it is a mistake to view the laws as something of a checklist to be marked off.

Copan also observed that the laws taught Israel that “living under God’s reign should affect all of life.”³ Neither the Jews at the time, nor we today should view our lives as having two separate “compartments,” one for our religious life and the other for everything else. As Norman Geisler stated, God wanted to redeem his people. But “[c]omplete redemption involved more than getting Israel out of Egypt. It also involved getting ‘Egypt’ (i.e., the world) out of them.”⁴ By creating laws that impacted various areas of Jewish lives, God prescribed a way of life that would cause them to be seeking to him first, even in the most mundane daily tasks.

This arrangement was never intended to be permanent. Copan argues that it “would help prepare the cultural and theological context for God’s revelation of Jesus of Nazareth ‘when the

¹ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 72 (emphasis in original).

² *Ibid*, 72-73.

³ *Ibid*, 75.

⁴ Norman L. Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1977), 58.

fullness of the time came.’ (Gal. 4:4).”⁵ Some modern Jews dispute this notion, and claim that Christianity cannot be true because the covenant given at Sinai was meant to be eternal. Michael L. Brown refutes one justification for this argument stemming from Malachi 4:4-6. According to Brown, some modern Jews claim that this passage in Malachi shows “plainly that the Torah of Moses will continue until the coming of Elijah prior to God’s final judgment.”⁶ Elijah has not yet returned nor has God’s final judgment arrived. Therefore, the Mosaic covenant must still be in place.

As Brown points out, though, this argument falls apart with a mere reading of the text.

The passage that allegedly supports this conclusion states:

4 “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

5 “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”
(Mal. 4:4-6, NIV)

Brown asks, “Where does this say that God’s primary way of dealing with Israel until the end of the age would be through the Torah and not through the Messiah (or, at the least, not through both)?”⁷ There are two separate statements present. The first is a warning to remember the Torah. The second is a promise that Elijah will return before the end-times judgment. There is nothing connecting the two that would justify the conclusion that the Torah will remain the way

⁵ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 49.

⁶ Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus: Traditional Objections* (San Francisco: Purple Pomegranate Productions, 2009), 163.

⁷ *Ibid.*

in which God related to humanity until Elijah's return.⁸ It was never God's intention for the Sinaitic Covenant to remain in place. It, along with the "ubiquitous" laws, would exist long enough to serve its purposes until the time was right for the Messiah to come to Earth and usher in a better and everlasting covenant.

Thus, Copan demonstrates that these laws which seem so odd to us today actually served some important functions in furthering God's overall plan. But once they served their purpose, the New Covenant was ushered in by Jesus.

In chapter 5, 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.⁹ 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."¹⁰ 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.¹¹ While these are tragic scenarios, the killing of innocent lives appears morally justified in order to prevent greater harm (although in both

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 43.

¹⁰ Ibid, 49.

¹¹ Ibid.

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;
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.¹²

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.¹³ Copan proposes that the critic faces a difficult task. Given this context, are there any convincing reasons why Abraham shouldn't have obeyed God?¹⁴ 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

¹² Ibid, 46 - 50.

¹³ Ibid, 50.

¹⁴ Ibid, 50.

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."¹⁵ Similarly, Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe state, "God alone is sovereign over life ..., and therefore He alone has the right to demand when it should be taken."¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ An argument could be made that the examples he provides involving an ectopic pregnancy and the saving of additional lives on

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Norman Geisler, Thomas Howe, *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 51.

¹⁷ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 49.

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.

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."¹⁸ 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.

¹⁸ Geisler, Howe, *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties*, 51.