

BOOK REVIEW

Is God a Vindictive Bully?**Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old and New Testaments**

by Paul Copan

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022, 304 pages

Is God A Vindictive Bully? is a companion piece to Paul Copan's 2011 book, *Is God a Moral Monster?* However, its subtitle, *Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old and New Testaments*, covers only half of the book because the work is equally concerned with the portrayal of the ancient Hebrews reactions to and interpretations of the law. So, I look first at Copan's analysis of the Hebrew's enactment of God's laws, and then at the "bullying" part—God's wrath and smittings.

Copan's thesis is that so much of what we read in the Old Testament was either based on mistranslations or parts of the Mosaic Law that were not actually implemented. In essence, the Old Testament is prone to exaggerations and hyperbole. Copan explains in clear language and informative explanations, something I have not found that likely in my readings of contemporary theologians. One obvious example is Copan's reiteration that an "eye-for-eye," which is seen as harsh and vengeful punishments, cannot be taken literally. The reality emphasized a proportionality that never invoked bodily harm, but instead engendered monetary payment. To use a modern phrase, "the punishment fit the crime." According to Copan, no incident of someone losing an eye because they had caused a loss of someone else's eye is to be found in the Old Testament. Only murder was seen as crime that could not be commuted through some form of remuneration, usually monetary.

Basically, then, Copan's position is that the Mosaic Laws were intended to be exemplary rather than common practice. They only expressed the limits of what was considered socially accepted behavior; they did not "describe actual behaviors" (15). The Laws were only warnings intended "to put the fear of God into the Israelites" (72). Thus, according to Copan, no one was put to death for adultery, or cursing one's parents, etc. Shame, dishonor, or ostracism were the more common punishments. Copan puts to rest any literal reading of excessive punishment in the Old Testament because there is little or no evidence of it.

As for the second thesis of the book, i.e., whether God in the Old Testament is a vindictive bully, as someone who, to be honest, has struggled with this question, I looked forward to reading what such a distinguished theologian as Copan had to say about it. Specifically, I have always had problems with the killing of Egypt's first born, and the parting of the Red Sea which resulted in the drowning of the pursuing soldiers. How does one reconcile these actions from Jesus in the New Testament? As a sociologist, my approach is to look for what my dissertation advisor, Robert Bierstedt, taught me—a "cogent argument." So, after reading Copan, I believe that he has made a cogent argument against what some critics claim—that the New Testament must be "unhitched" from the Old Testament because the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, whereas Jesus is a God of love.

For, as Copan states, as the giver of life, God "is under no obligation to bestow life or sustain it for seventy or eighty years" (109). Thus, to deny wrath on God's part means not only to deny His love, but also His sense of justice. Parents discipline their children; so, too, can God discipline his creations. Justice may not be in the eyes of the beholder but is in God's vision for humanity. And, if anything, it's extremely difficult to argue that God's wrath is not outweighed by His manifestation in Jesus of Nazareth, specifically in Christ's sacrificial death for the sins of humanity. To deny God's wrath, then, is not only to deny His love, but also His sense of justice and redemption.

At the heart of Copan's argument, and the best way to frame and conclude this review, is a quote from C.S. Lewis: "The ultimate question is whether the doctrine of the goodness of God or that of the inerrancy of the Scriptures is to prevail when they conflict. I think the doctrine of the goodness of God is the more certain of the two. Indeed, only that doctrine renders the worship of Him obligatory or even permissible" (236). For a Christian, there is nothing more that can be said about whether God is a vindictive bully than that He is not. The Christian God is a God of love, and Copan has provided a cogent argument to fortify this assertion.

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