

THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IS NO NEO ATHEISTIC STEREOTYPE:
JONAH'S GOD OF COMPASSION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION..... 1

 Compassion.....2

 Forgiveness.....5

 Restoration..... 8

 Conclusion.....11

BIBLIOGRAPHY..... 13

THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IS NO NEO ATHEISTIC STEREOTYPE: JONAH'S GOD OF COMPASSION

Introduction

On April 15, 2013, two bombs exploded near the finish line at the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring two hundred sixty others¹. One of the apprehended suspects, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, when interrogated by the police, led them to believe that his motivation for the attack was religious extremism². Having perused countless Islamic extremist websites, and after adopting a belief system of aggressive, militant fanaticism, Tsarnaev and his brother methodically planned the murder of innocent lives in the name of religion. It is this course of action that has given rise to the neo atheistic movement in recent times, offering the postulate that all religion is evil, and any god that existed would have to be evil as well to order his followers to murder in his name³. Neo atheistic authors such as Richard Dawkins have also made a profitable income with books such as *The God Delusion*, selling over two million copies worldwide

¹ Denise Lavoie and Eileen Sullivan, "Officials: Bombers Read Jihadist Sites," [on-line]; accessed 25 April 2013; available from <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/metro/20130423-boston-bombing-suspect-charged-officials-say-religion-motivated-brothers.ece>; Internet.

² Ibid; Internet.

³ David Wood, "Epic Showdown," [on-line]; accessed 25 April 2013; available from <http://www.answeringsmuslims.com/2013/04/epic-showdown-islamophobia-industry-vs.html>; Internet.

portraying God as angry, intent on destroying His creation⁴. He is joined by a chorus of other skeptics, such as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett (The Four Horsemen of New Atheism), who call for the killing of this invisible god⁵, so that rational human thought (and therefore humane behavior) may prevail. In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins says that,

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, blood-thirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully⁶.

When taken out of historical context, and excluding related scripture that completes the picture of the character of God, it is understandable how this image is easily propagated. However, examination of theologies such as Jonah reveal the true nature of the Old Testament God, painting Him as a compassionate, forgiving, and loving being, whose ultimate goal is the restoration of all people.

Compassion

While discipline is often viewed with a negative connotation, God uses it as a tool to keep those He loves from greater harm. Warning a city such as Nineveh of

⁴ Richard Dawkins, "How many copies of The God Delusion Have Been Sold?" [online]; accessed 15 April 2013; available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2010/02/03/how-many-copies-of-the-god-delusion-have-been-sold/>; Internet.

⁵ "The New Atheism," [on-line]; accessed 14 April 2013; available from <http://newatheists.org>; Internet.

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 51.

impending discipline in order to save them from its repercussions is an overt act of compassion from a loving God. During the Old Testament era, nations such as the Assyrians, who populated Nineveh, were known for their savagery. When conquering a city, the Assyrians would often place hooks in the captives' mouths in order to lead them into exile⁷. The inhabitants of Nineveh were perennial enemies of the nation of Israel, and the prophet Jonah was a staunch patriot. He was decidedly pro-Israel and anti-foreign nation, and favored any action against Israel's enemies that would result in their punishment or destruction⁸. It is through this unlikely vessel that God chose to warn the Ninevites about their impending discipline.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown"⁹.

Jonah did not want to take this message to the Ninevites because of the history that the Assyrians shared with the people of Israel, having shown extreme cruelty to them in the past¹⁰. If God were not compassionate, He would not have sent a messenger from His own people to warn the very people that had mistreated his favored nation. In the new

⁷ David Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011), 205.

⁸ D.A Carson, R.T. France, J.A. Motyer, and G.J. Wenham, G.J., *New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1994), 814.

⁹ Jonah 3:1-4, New American Standard Bible.

¹⁰ R.L. Moberly, "Jonah, God's Objectionable Mercy, and the Way of Wisdom," *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 3, No.1 (2003).

atheistic portrait of god, an angry deity would have sent no messenger to warn of his impending destruction. Rather, the destruction would have come swiftly, with no other purpose than for the amusement of the deity itself¹¹. In this Jonah himself testifies, as he knows the character of God. He knows that if he preaches to the city of Nineveh, God will have compassion on them.

But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, “Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, and one who relents concerning calamity¹².”

But God’s compassion is not just corporate, it is very much personal. As stated earlier, Jonah did not want to take God’s warning to Nineveh, given his prejudicial feelings against the Assyrians¹³. When faced with this task, Jonah promptly chartered a ship to Tarshish, perhaps in the hope that God would choose another messenger. This open rebellion was met with discipline, as God intervened in Jonah’s itinerary.

The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging¹⁴.

A neo atheistic god would have carried out a full measure of vengeance on such an impudent servant. The God of the Old Testament, however, acted with

¹¹ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 56.

¹² Jonah 4:1-3, NASB.

¹³ Carson, et al., *New Bible Commentary*, 814.

¹⁴ Jonah 1:4,15, NASB.

compassion and allowed Jonah to reconsider his decision for a period and return to service.

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights. Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land¹⁵.

The feat of preparing a three-day period of reflection for Jonah is considered an act of deliverance from death by drowning in the sea, rather than of punishment by an angry god¹⁶. The compassion exhibited by God in Jonah stands in stark contrast to the image drawn of the neo atheistic movement of today, both in His relation to people who are deemed believers and to those who do not fit that traditional definition as well.

Forgiveness

The neo atheistic god cannot forgive, because he possesses no compassion. He has not exhibited any documented actions indicating an attitude of forgiveness, but meets out destruction almost at a whim, as he pleases¹⁷. In Jonah, however, God extends forgiveness to His creations, though undeservedly, on multiply occasions. This behavior can hardly be viewed as vengeful, and refutes the neo atheistic claims that God is unforgiving. After receiving the warning through Jonah that discipline was coming, the residents of the city reversed course and completely humbled themselves before God.

¹⁵ Jonah 1:17, 2:10, NASB.

¹⁶ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdman's Publishing, 1976), 196.

¹⁷ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. He issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish¹⁸ .

Had God desired revenge, He would have carried out the “threats” proposed against the city, humble gestures notwithstanding. However, upon seeing the city humbled before Him, God reversed course and forgave them.

When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it¹⁹ .

Neo atheists point out citywide destructive events in the Bible, such as the fiery demise of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18, and note God’s anger and punitive measures on humanity. However, God’s destruction on Sodom and Gomorrah does not conflict with His behavior in Jonah, where He shows compassion and forgiveness. In fact, it substantiates it. In both events, God’s ultimate goal was the forgiveness and restoration of the inhabitants of each city, but only should repentance be seen in the hearts of the people²⁰ . Sodom, though destroyed, was offered pardon if as few as ten were found righteous in the city. In

¹⁸ Jonah 3:5-9, NASB.

¹⁹ Jonah 3:10, NASB.

²⁰ Jack M. Sasson, *The Anchor Bible Commentaries: Jonah* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 243.

Nineveh, the whole city, en masse, repented and was forgiven.

As God showed compassion in allowing His servant Jonah to reconsider accepting his task for a period, He also offered forgiveness to him as well. This action stands in stark contrast to the new atheistic description of a God that is both angry and overbearing²¹. Jonah was able to personally talk to God, indicating a close, not aloof relationship with Him.

And he said, I called out of my distress to the Lord, And He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice²².

The fact that he asked for forgiveness and help is in itself revealing, as it shows that Jonah believed God to be a forgiving being. Upon hearing Jonah's reconciliation request, God relented, and forgave his rebellion. Forgiveness is integral to the divine desire that God has for each nation and individual. It is His ability to forgive undeserving creatures that defines the term mercy, and does so in a way that codifies the entity of God itself. Jonah indicated this understanding when praying for forgiveness, as he realized that he did not deserve to be delivered from the depths. He acknowledged God's sovereignty in the matter and prayed for God, as a function of their personal relationship, to show mercy towards him²³. Whether God is relating to a city as a whole or to an individual, He is a personal being, interested in forgiving those who seek Him.

²¹ Nathan Crawford. "God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response To Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens," *Anglican Theological Review* 94, No. 1 (2012): 136-140.

²² Jonah 2:2, NASB.

²³ *The ESV Study Bible*, Broadman: Wheaton, 2008, 1688.

Restoration

The ultimate desire and heart of the God of the Old Testament is the restoration and redemption of hearts and lives – to draw people to Himself. In this regard, He will use any means effective. As previously noted, discipline has a distinctly negative connotation – especially when viewed in the context of modern culture. However, one must look at this tool through the broader lens of God’s redemptive plan. The city of Nineveh was behaving in such a way that had brought pain and cruelty to others²⁴. By warning them of their impending discipline, accepting their return, and proffering forgiveness, God displayed His redemptive nature. His desire from the outset was to forgive and restore the people of Nineveh. Were it not, He would have carried out His plan, with or without having received the city’s plea for forgiveness. Instead, His desire was fulfilled, as the Ninevites were redeemed from the punishment they deserved. Throughout the book of Jonah, during the warnings to Nineveh and communications between God and his messenger, it is the Hebrew YHWH, or national God of Israel that was orchestrating the events. However, when the residents of Nineveh cried out to God, they were answered by the Hebrew Elohim, the Mighty Covenant Keeper with mankind²⁵. This variance in nomenclature indicates a God with a predefined plan for the redemption of people

²⁴ Moberly, “Jonah, God’s Objectionable Mercy, and the Way of Wisdom,” (2003).

²⁵ R. Kendall Soulen, “The Sign of Jonah”, *Theology Today* 65, No. 3 (2008):331-343.

who stray from His prescribed path. Clearly, a God that remains committed to such an arrangement does not fit the description of the neo atheistic deity.

He further distances Himself from this stereotype by restoring the personal life of Jonah as well. This document already has shown how God restored His rebellious servant to duty after having been thrown into an angry sea. However, once Jonah delivered the message to the city of Nineveh, he waited on a nearby hill to watch for God's verdict. When God forgave the city, Jonah was upset, as he wanted Him to act as the Four Horsemen of Atheism would imagine, and destroy it.

But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life²⁶.

In this prayer to God, Jonah echoed the Psalmist (86:15), but with the opposite heart. In effect, because God refused to punish the enemies of Israel, but restored them, Jonah had lost his reason to live²⁷. It is this manifestation of God through man that fuels the neo theistic cry that religion is the root of all evil and, if a god exists, he must be unjust²⁸. Jonah's behavior epitomizes the Christian attitude deplored by new atheists of today, as he hates his neighbor, is reluctant to help

²⁶ Jonah 4:1-4, NASB.

²⁷ Carson, et al., *New Bible Commentary*, 821.

²⁸ Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?*, 205.

them, and is unhappy when his god does not destroy the enemy of the nation founded by his religion. But this is not the behavior, the heart, nor the direction of God. Rather than cast him aside for a pattern of disobedience, God gently reminded him of His Sovereignty and desire to restore the people of Nineveh. In doing so, He revealed the His heart to a man through the death of a plant.

Then God said to Jonah, “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “I have good reason to be angry, even to death.” Then the Lord said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals²⁹?

The reference to not knowing the “difference between their right and left hand” is symbolic of spiritual blindness or ignorance³⁰. By comparing Jonah’s responses to the dying plant (anger over its death) with the redemption of an entire city (anger over their redemption), God further shows that His true nature is to compassionately forgive, then restore broken lives³¹. If “morality is measured by the willingness of humanity to obey what God commands³², in this the people of Nineveh possess a greater level of morality than Jonah was exhibiting at this point in time. This also demonstrates the tremendous value that God places on all

²⁹ Jonah 4:9-11, NASB.

³⁰ Carson, et al., *New Bible Commentary*, 821.

³¹ Ibid, 821.

³² Mary Mills, “Urban Morality and the Great City in the Book of Jonah,” *Political Theology* 11, No. 3 (2010): 453-465.

human life, Jewish or otherwise³³.

Conclusion

After the attacks on the World Trade Center in September of 2001, the neo atheistic movement began to enjoy a rise in popularity by combining all faiths into one religion, and denouncing them as the cause of all war. From this sentiment, its followers reasoned that such ignorant, unproven belief systems must finally be extinguished from the earth so that violence would cease³⁴. As time passes, there will undoubtedly be similar attacks on innocent people in the name of religion, and atheists will be there to affix blame. Atheism itself is not new. The facet of neo atheism that differentiates it from classic atheism is the aggressive nature in which members attack both the character and reason for the “existence” of God³⁵. However, the Bible accurately records the true loving nature of God, so that believers may counter the challenges posed. Theologies such as Jonah adequately refute such lines of thought, as they copiously depict God acting in His true character. In all of His handiwork, God’s primary focus is the redemption of people and the drawing of hearts to Himself. It is His love for His creation that drives Him to immeasurable compassion and forgiveness, with the intent that the peoples of the earth will turn to Him for restoration. In discipline, His goal is correction so that the errant will turn to the correct way. Though physical pain may be temporary, it

³³ Ibid, 453-465.

³⁴ “The New Atheism,” Internet.

³⁵ Ryan Dueck, “Angry at the God Who Isn’t There: The New Atheism as a Theocracy,” *Direction Journal* 40, No.1 (2011).

is His ultimate goal to keep people from eternal spiritual agony. In every event that He brings into the paths of individuals, it is His desire to restore hearts and lives, and keep them from the spiritual death that waits. It is this compassion, forgiveness, and restorative spirit that make Him unlike any other being. These character traits prove not only His existence, but bring life to all those who choose to believe in Him.

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