

# AN EVALUATION OF THE NEW ATHEIST'S ANTI-YAHWISTIC ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is an evaluation of the argument from evil that is put forward by the new atheists. Specifically, there is a nuanced form of this argument that appears repeatedly in their writings as a general attack on Yahweh and the Hebrew Bible. The basic question they ask is how Yahweh can be considered God since he was the agent of so much evil throughout the Old Testament. In order to approach this problem systematically, it is necessary to clearly define what the claims of the new atheist are.

### **The New Atheist**

Many scholars in the scientific, philosophical, and theological disciplines have recognized a recent influx in the popularity of a movement that has come to be known as "the new atheism." The new atheists consist of scientists and intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett. Sam Harris should also be included here, though may not be considered by many to be an intellectual. While these atheists have received a great deal of praise from the non-academic populace of recent times, they have received an equal amount of criticism from some of their fellow intellectual atheists and theists. Alister McGrath identifies this problem in his response to Dawkins's *The God Delusion*:

*The God Delusion* trumpets the fact that its author was recently voted one of the world's three leading intellectuals. This survey took place among the readers of *Prospect* magazine in

November 2005. So what did this same magazine make of Dawkins's book? Its reviewer was shocked at this "incurious, dogmatic, rambling, and self-contradictory" book. The title of the review? 'Dawkins the Dogmatist.'<sup>1</sup>

This summarizes the sentiments of the intellectual world to a brand of atheism that communicates its theories about religion in terms that can be described as pejorative and *ad hominem* in nature. Their methods typically involve a mischaracterization of a theistic position followed by a ritual burning down of what was built only by straw, and as a result "the intellectual quality of their atheism is unnecessarily diminished."<sup>2</sup>

The new atheists are all unequivocally scientific naturalists who deny that anything that exists has come by any means other than through naturalistic, materialistic processes. To this the new atheists add their complaints about religion—the foremost of which involves the problem of evil.<sup>3</sup> The problem of evil is the question of how God (on the classic theist definition of God) could exist in a world where evil occurs. The most interesting strand of this argument is seen in their proposition that religion—the outworking of theism—has produced a phenomenal amount of evil in the world and thus ought to be rejected on moral grounds that can be achieved outside the realm of religion. They approach this question from several angles, but one of their favorite examples of evil religion involves an evaluation of Yahweh and Hebrew Bible.<sup>4</sup> How, they ask, can Yahweh, who is the manifestation of most classical theists' God, be considered a good God when he is the progenitor of so much evil? Or, to make it more parallel to the definition of the problem of evil given above, how can Yahweh exist in a world where evil not only occurs, but is directly caused by Him with no connected greater good? This facet of the problem of evil attacks God's existence from the standpoint of his being himself evil. Here, God's own

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<sup>1</sup> Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 12.

<sup>2</sup> John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2008), xii. Haught proceeds with a quote worth sharing: "Their understanding of religious faith remains consistently at the same unscholarly level as the unreflective, superstitious, and literalist religiosity of those they criticize."

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dawkins focuses primarily on the violence that has been caused by radical Muslims, but also gives Yahweh his share of criticism.

rap sheet disproves his existence. While it is true that the new atheist focuses primarily on why Yahweh should not be a role model, their clear goal is to promote disbelief in Yahweh as an actual Being.<sup>5</sup>

### **Responses to the New Atheist**

Several theists have responded to the new atheists, attacking each of the issues that are brought up in impressive fashion: Alister McGrath, John F. Haught, Paul Copan, Gregory E. Ganssle and others. These philosophers have similar complaints about the harsh nature of their opponents' literature, but they offer reasoned responses to the arguments that are put forward.<sup>6</sup>

Although each of these theistic philosophers provide unique responses to the new atheist, there appears to be a common thread of argumentation implicit throughout their writings—that the new atheist is bewilderingly ignorant of scholarship in the Hebrew Bible, Christian theology, and the ancient Near East (ANE). Being scientists, it is expected that the new atheists should be unconcerned with the disciplines just mentioned, but being anti-Yahwistic atheists demands that they become acquainted with these lest they commit the fallacy of overgeneralization and mischaracterization of a field with which they are unfamiliar.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, they commit this fallacy with rare boldness.

### **The Purpose of this Paper**

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<sup>5</sup> This is uniquely different than a cross-religious debate where one tradition seeks to dismantle another by accusations of inconsistency in the other's system of belief. The opposing faith does not likely want to promote disbelief in the existence of a god, but disbelief in the existence of that particular god. On the other hand, the new atheist is attacking the God of one of the largest religions in the world in hopes that it will promote disbelief in the existence of such a being as God at all. The new atheist would fail should his converts decide to switch religions; instead, he wants his followers to deny the existence of religion and shelve it somewhere in the categories of myth, egotism, and ethnocentrism.

<sup>6</sup> The following information on each of the authors is not sufficiently relevant to the body of this paper to warrant inclusion, but is nonetheless helpful in understanding the context of the debate: McGrath answers Dawkins's *The God Delusion* in an ironically short but concise 118 pages in *The Dawkins Delusion*, by addressing, among other things, Dawkins's misrepresentations of religion and his inaccurate claim that religion produces evil while atheism sits on the sidelines with its hands folded. Haught addresses similar themes, but does so more thoroughly, attacking several of the philosophical claims of the new atheists. Paul Copan presented a paper in 2008 that attacked Dawkins's, Hitchens's, Dennett's and Harris's assumption that the foundation of scientific naturalism is sufficient for determining situational good and evil—an ability for which theism is better fitted.

The goal of this paper is to analyze the underlying syllogisms that structure the new atheists' and theists' arguments regarding the nature of Yahweh in the Old Testament. The new atheist has a very harsh opinion of Yahweh and the Hebrew Bible in general, an opinion that can be shown to be unsound given the underlying principles inherent in the theists' responses to this particularly nuanced problem of evil.

### **ESTABLISHMENT OF THE FIRST PREMISE OF THE PRO-YAHWIST**

The purpose of this first section is to establish that an accurate knowledge of the ANE world and its literature, specifically the Hebrew Bible, is necessary before one can fairly evaluate the actions of Yahweh and the other characters of the Old Testament. It is clear that a society existing in excess of 3,000 years ago in a cultural setting quite foreign and incomparable to our own will not be easily judged. Fortunately, a great deal of scholarship in the twentieth century has enabled us to approach the Hebrew Bible in its context so as to blow away some of the smoke that has clouded our understanding of its culture for centuries.

Before developing the argument that such knowledge is needed, it is important to understand how this issue is related to the new atheist. For this reason, we will examine the syllogistic forms of their arguments (broad, then narrow) that are implicit throughout their writings.

#### **The New Atheist, Religion, and Problem of Evil**

In their argument regarding the moral decadence of religion, the new atheists follow what seems to be a rather simple syllogistic form:

- 1) If theism is true then religion will produce more good than evil.
- 2) Religion has produced a great deal more evil than good.
- 3) Therefore, theism is probably not true.

This we will call the "broader NA (new atheists') syllogism," since it does not directly address Yahweh or the biblical texts but deals merely with religion in general. While this argument is certainly

valid, its soundness is hampered by the fact that there are some obvious *a priori* assumptions made here about religion.

To begin, while the new atheist is in a curious position to make such statements regarding what religion should be, 1) nevertheless seems to be a fair evaluation of how most people view religion.<sup>8</sup> Trouble comes for the atheist in the second premise, since its truth is dependent upon the facts of history and a momentous range of historical interpretation. It is apparent that religion has been the direct and indirect cause of a great deal of violence in the world: the crusades, jihadism, sectarian warfare within Hinduism and so forth, but one must ask whether evil is a necessary product of religion or an unnecessary perversion of it.<sup>9</sup> The average Christian readily joins the atheist in condemning the crusades, witch trials, and other pointless violence that has resulted from disputes over petty theological points, but he (the theist) disapproves for a different reason. The Christian views events like those listed above as perversions of an ideal form of Christianity that was handed down from Christ and the apostles.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, the new atheist has a point, because the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center is an obvious example of how modern religion promotes violence, since a strict reading of the Koran demands that its followers participate in Jihad in order to secure heaven for themselves.<sup>11</sup> But nowhere in the New Testament are modern Christians encouraged to be violent in any way and it is not necessary to reject the Old Testament to come to this conclusion since the Old Testament was said by Jesus himself to be fulfilled and unbinding on modern believers (Matt 5:17;

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<sup>8</sup> McGrath, 75-97. This is a basic underlying assumption of atheists and theists when coming to the subject of religion.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 76. Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 15-36. Hitchens discusses the horrors of violence that have been wrought by various religions through the ages.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 79. Some religions certainly do encourage religion, but not all do—in fact Christianity boldly prohibits personal vengeance.

<sup>11</sup> Since I am not a scholar of the Koran I must defer to those modern Islamists who believe Jihadism is a corruption in interpretation and practice. So Islam may not even be a good example for Dawkins and others since Jihad may be a perversion of an ideal, but I'm sure that if one looked hard enough he could find a religion somewhere that promotes modern violence. The fact is, religion in general does not promote violence any more than secularism.

Heb 7:12). Furthermore, there are no universal dictates in the Old Testament that command modern Christians to wage warfare on the enemies of God.

The broader NA syllogism is the foundation upon which stand the new atheist's complaints about the God of the Old Testament. It is admittedly not difficult to see how atheists have arrived at this conclusion—that blood-shedding and religions are intrinsically related—since for centuries the abuse and misapplication of religion (particularly in Christianity) has confirmed this relationship to the untrained eye. Certainly some religions do promote violence, but it would be more appropriate to understand the relationship between violence and Christianity as a relationship between violence and pseudo-Christianity. When speaking of the ancient Hebrews, however, it is important to remember that, as far as Yahweh was concerned, the prescribed practice of warfare was, in general, an eradicator of evil rather than a producer of evil since the haters of righteousness were destroyed in the process. I say "in general" because many of God's warriors (i.e. David, Joshua, etc.) committed atrocities in warfare that God did not command of them. Before moving on, it is important for the critic of Yahweh to understand that "righteousness" and "truth" were not culturally subjective terms that surrounding nations would be unaware of. In ANE literature "righteousness" is a common term, and Yahweh continually holds ANE people responsible for their violation of obvious moral truths (i.e. pagans burning their children and filling the walls of their houses with their children's remains as an act of worship to Marduk and other gods. Also, the warfare practice of splitting open a mother's womb and dashing the unborn child against a stone).<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, the new atheist wants to pit the moral values of religion against those of atheism in hopes that the latter will prove to be the more sanctified, but McGrath points out that religion has not lead to violence any more than atheism has led to extreme violence in the Soviet Union and

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<sup>12</sup> In case the critic would object that David performed or suggested that one should perform the same type of heinous (Ps. 137:9), it should be remembered that this passage is speaking figuratively about the inhabitants of Babylon. The "daughter of Babylon" is representative of Babylon and the "little ones" are representative of its inhabitants in general. It is not a call to cut open a mother's womb in order to perform warfare abortion, a practice condemned by the Old Testament prophets (Amos 1:13).

elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> When societies reject religion they often replace it with other "quasi-divine authorities" that encourage wholesale violence.<sup>14</sup> The fact that atheism has had its own share of homegrown terrorists need not be expanded upon; it is merely important to note that violence is not directly related to whether or not an individual or society believes in the existence of God.

### **The Narrower NA Syllogism**

Dawkins's famous quote regarding Yahweh is sufficient to capture the new atheist's perspective on the God of the Hebrew Bible:

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.<sup>15</sup>

They have targeted the Abrahamic faiths, highlighting the manifestations of evil in Islam, ancient Judaism, and Christianity. The focus of this paper rests on the two religious faiths that worship Yahweh, since the latter of the two—Christianity—is still the most prominent religious force in the West. The conclusions the new atheist draws concerning Yahweh affect the New Testament in a significant way, which will, in turn, affect the modern Christian who is primarily concerned with what the New Testament teaches.

As can be seen in the previous section, the soundness of 3) is brought into considerable doubt when essential interpretational issues are applied to 2). Thus, the broader NA syllogism is in no way airtight and is, at best, weak as a foundation upon which to build the narrower NA syllogism.

The narrower NA syllogism is a subset of the former and an application of the broader to a specific religious tradition—Yahwism. It can be stated as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 249. "I do not believe there is an atheist in the world who would bulldoze Mecca—or Chartres, York Minster or Notre Dame, the Shwe Dagon, the temples of Kyoto or, of course, the Buddhas of Bamiyan." This is, of course, a little optimistic in light of the history of the Soviet Union.

<sup>14</sup> McGrath, 81. Atheistic regimes have, in fact, bulldozed sacred religious buildings and monuments. Note the Soviet Union.

<sup>15</sup> Dawkins, 31.

4) If God (according to the standard theistic definition) exists, he is neither a morally repugnant being nor a progenitor of evil.

5) Yahweh, the God of the Christian faith, is shown (by reading the Hebrew Bible) to be a morally repugnant being and a progenitor of evil.

6) Therefore, Yahweh does not exist.

Obviously, the crux of this argument for the atheist lies in 5). To support their claim they draw heavily from their cursory reading of the Old Testament. Below, the new atheist's justification for 5) is demonstrated.

To begin, Dawkins disapproves of Yahweh's "dim view of humans" and the global murder that took place as a result in the Noahic flood.<sup>16</sup> He also points to the actions of Lot who copulated with his two daughters only after offering them to the sexually ravenous men of Sodom as a truce for temporary protection of the two angels. Dawkins sarcastically drones on and on about the horrors of the Lot story and wonders how such an "intensely religious culture" could produce so much horrifying evil.<sup>17</sup> He does not leave out the Levite and his concubine, the latter being raped all night long then ceremonially mutilated. The stories of Lot and the Levite are so similar, he claims, that they are probably the result of "the erratic provenance of sacred texts."<sup>18</sup> Dawkins does not find it ironic that he is in one sense affirming the reliability of the Old Testament by taking its depiction of Yahweh as literal and at the same time attacking the reliability of the text. He also brings up the heinous sins of Abraham (especially the near sacrifice of Isaac), Jephthah, Aaron, Moses, Joshua, and of course, Yahweh. He assumes that if a heinous act is committed by a servant of Yahweh, the latter is somehow approving of it.<sup>19</sup> These and other Old Testament examples are the justification for Dawkins's hatred of Yahweh.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>19</sup> Copan, 15.



Daniel Dennet shares a similar disgust for this God whose "kinglike jealousy and pride, and His great appetite for praise and sacrifices" make him altogether unappealing.<sup>20</sup>

Hitchens and Harris do not have better things to say about Yahweh and the Hebrew Scriptures.

Remarking on the triviality of the Ten Commandments, Hitchens writes:

But however little one thinks of the Jewish tradition, it is surely insulting to the people of Moses to imagine that they had come this far under the impression that murder, adultery, theft, and perjury were permissible.<sup>21</sup>

He goes on to criticize the text of the Ten Commandments itself by noting that it was obviously manmade, otherwise "wife" would not be included in the list of a man's property.<sup>22</sup> Hitchens is thankful that "none of the gruesome, disordered events described in Exodus ever took place," a point he attempts to prove by recognizing that archaeologists have not uncovered sufficient evidence to affirm the exodus.<sup>23</sup> He also spends some time attacking the traditional authorship of the Pentateuch, claiming that Moses could not have written his own funeral, among other things.<sup>24</sup> We should not proceed without mentioning Sam Harris, in whose *Letter to a Christian Nation* the indictment against the Old Testament involves the suggestion that modern Christians should stone their children for lying to them in order to demonstrate obedience to the Mosaic Law.<sup>25</sup>

In all, the complaints of the new atheists appear to be justifiable on the surface, but the aim of scholarship is to dig beneath the surface in an honest mission to uncover the truth behind why things are the way that they are. In order to accomplish this, however, a standard in the form of a premise must be established.

### **Old Testament Research as a Standard of Scholarship from which to Draw Conclusions Concerning the Text of the Hebrew Bible**

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 265.

<sup>21</sup> Hitchens, 99.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-105.

<sup>25</sup> Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 8.

The problem with the narrower NA syllogism is that it commits a mistake similar to the broader one—both 2) and 5) are premises that cannot be necessarily true since they depend heavily on interpretation and scholarship in the fields of religion and the ANE. Thus, the need for the following premise:

7) In order to develop a sound polemic against the actions and person of Yahweh one must be adequately familiar with social and scriptural contexts of the ancient Near East (ANE) and the Old Testament.

The new atheist cannot be justified in believing 6) without knowing that 7) is the case. Paul Copan addresses the issue this way: Though certain OT texts present challenges and difficulties, navigating these waters is achievable with patient, nuanced attention given to the relevant OT texts, the ancient Near East (ANE) context, and the broader biblical canon.<sup>26</sup> Copan goes on to note that there is a "drastically different mindset between ANE and modern societies," but this difference can be overcome by acquiring an accurate understanding (as accurate as possible) of this foreign culture and how events said to have occurred should be interpreted.<sup>27</sup> It may seem unnecessary to prove that scholarship in any particular field is essential before one can legitimately criticize elements of that field, but this seemingly obvious point is not so evident to the new atheist, and thus the need to establish 7).<sup>28</sup>

### **ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SECOND PREMISE OF THE PRO-YAHWIST**

As Dawkins cleverly puts it, the Bible is "just plain weird."<sup>29</sup> This weirdness, he writes, is the result of it being "chaotically cobbled together" by "hundreds of anonymous authors."<sup>30</sup> The weirdness to which Dawkins refers is more than likely a result of his unfamiliarity with the ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and biblical scholarship in general. After all, why would a scientist be interested in

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<sup>26</sup> Copan, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>28</sup> For examples of how the new atheist is ignoring interpretive practices in the Old Testament see below: "The New Atheist's Ignorance of the Hebrew Bible."

<sup>29</sup> Dawkins, 237.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

these disciplines if naturalism can, by itself, answer the question of God's existence? As atheistic anti-Yahwists, though, Dawkins and his contemporaries have inadvertently signed themselves up for courses in these disciplines, but they have apparently chosen to skip class. This point will be developed later, but now it must be established that the falsity of 5) can be rectified only by acquiring sufficient knowledge concerning the world of the Bible, the language of the bible, Christian theology, and biblical scholarship in general.

In light of 7), we must evaluate the new atheist based on whether he truly is employing scholarship in his evaluation of the Hebrew text and its God. Unfortunately, atheists and theists alike have come to the disparaging conclusion that they have not. Thus, we are forced to establish the second major premise:

8) The new atheist is shown by scholars to be ignorant of the social and scriptural contexts of the ANE and the Old Testament.

The warrant for believing 8) is established in the following paragraphs.

### **The New Atheist's Ignorance of the Hebrew Bible**

Dawkins "takes a strongly negative attitude toward the Bible, based on generally superficial engagement with its core themes and ideas, and an inadequate knowledge of the text itself," states McGrath.<sup>31</sup> Both Dawkins and Hitchens repeatedly take elementary stabs at the reliability of the Hebrew text, but it is a known fact among biblical scholars that the texts to which these two refer were edited and redacted over centuries with painstaking caution.<sup>32</sup> For example, Dawkins chalks up the similarities in the stories of Lot and the Levite to a probable mixing up of manuscripts.<sup>33</sup> But what is the justification for this conclusion? If what happened to Lot (and what he did) was truly something characteristic of the decadence of ANE culture (and it was), then is it fantastic to believe that

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<sup>31</sup> McGrath, 89.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>33</sup> Dawkins, 241.

something similar would happen elsewhere in the same culture?<sup>34</sup> One need only observe a sample of ten murder cases in the United States by trained killers to notice similar behavior and even identical actions in each. The fact these two stories are similar is not enough to draw unsupported conclusions about the reliability of the texts. Dawkins also points out the two instances when Abraham lied about his relationship to his wife in order to avoid dying. In both of these instances, Pharaoh and the King of Gerar (Abimelek) respond in nearly the same way to Abraham's deceptive move. Again Dawkins asks, "Is the similarity another indicator of textual unreliability?"<sup>35</sup> Certainly not, one should think. Since both kings lived in the same culture and experienced the anger of Yahweh when they took Sarah into their respective harems, it is not unlikely that they should respond in nearly the same way. The fact that these two stories are similar is likely a result of Abraham's continued sin of pragmatism, not a mixing of manuscripts for which there is no evidence.

Dawkins is not the only offender in this matter—Hitchens makes simple mistakes of the same kind. He claims that "one can tell" that the text of Scripture is manmade because of how it is presented. For example, "wife" is mentioned along with the other property of the Israelite male, and this is sufficient for Hitchens to propose that God would never have said such a thing.<sup>36</sup> However, if all men viewed women as property, would God not present his truths using the cognitive categories already present in the ANE mind? After all, God is not claiming that a woman should be the property of a man or even that a woman actually is (in God's economy) the property of a man, but "property" happens to be the cognitive category into which she fits in the mind of an ANE man. Maybe this was not the ideal way to state the law, but it was the necessary way in order to communicate it best to those people. The new atheist fails to recognize that the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Mosaic Law, was intended to improve the moral ethos of a depraved culture, and that it only pointed to an ideal but was not itself

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<sup>34</sup> Copan, 26.

<sup>35</sup> Dawkins, 242.

<sup>36</sup> Hitchens, 100.

ideal.<sup>37</sup> Another embarrassing mistake made by Hitchens is his suggestion that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because in it he dies, and no one can write the account of their own funeral.<sup>38</sup> The embarrassing feature of this argument is that Hitchens is right, but he thinks that this somehow casts doubt on the reliability of the Hebrew Bible. One will be hard pressed to find a biblical scholar who thinks that Moses could have written his own funeral account, which is why this argument is straw man, approaching a non-issue.<sup>39</sup> The last argument Hitchens presents against the reliability of the Hebrew Bible may appear at first to be his strongest, but strength is certainly is one element that it is lacking. He makes the grandiose and unwarranted assertion that "It goes without saying that none of the gruesome, disordered events described in Exodus ever took place."<sup>40</sup> To prove his point he makes what we will call the archaeological fallacy. By this, I mean the error of assuming that since evidence has not yet been dug up, that it therefore does not exist. Conservative scholars date the exodus to around the fifteenth millennium BCE, so an archaeologist's ability to dig up anything that a nomadic populace left lying around in the desert 3,500 years ago is going to be extremely hindered. Many liberal scholars attacked the Hebrew Bible with the same claims Hitchens uses here until the archaeological revolution of the early twentieth century. Hitchens's argument is outdated and irrelevant in the eyes of modern scholars.<sup>41</sup>

As for their unified assault on the behavior of biblical characters, "they often imply that 'if it's in the Bible, it must be approved by the author'" or even God himself.<sup>42</sup> The Hebrew text does not always explicitly condemn the actions it presents, unless a condemnation is necessary in order to

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<sup>37</sup> Copan, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Hitchens, 104-105.

<sup>39</sup> Dawkins and Hitchens repeatedly combine all fringe and mainline Christian groups into one religious whole, which in turn disables them from understanding where scholarship (especially conservative scholarship) stands on the issues they raise. Hitchens's criticism of Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch is reminiscent of popular-level atheist/theist blogosphere transactions. Where, one must ask, is the academic professionalism in this approach?

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>41</sup> Donald Fowler, lecture notes for BIBL 373 Old Testament Backgrounds, Liberty University, School of Religion, March 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Copan, 15.

promote a particular theme the author is focusing on. For example, Jephthah's murdering of his daughter is an obvious sin that does not require a didactic aside by the author—his error is obvious and consistent with a major theme in the book of Judges, that everyone did what was "right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6). The characters in the Bible are shown with their positive and negative features, and the duty of the reader is to sift through this material in an effort to hear what Yahweh wants to communicate through the author.<sup>43</sup>

### **The New Atheist's Ignorance of Biblical Theology**

Another observation that we can make regarding the new atheist's lack of familiarity with relevant scholarship is their frightening inattentiveness to biblical theology. For example, Daniel Dennett proudly remarks how Yahweh is a "jealous" and "wrathful" being, clearly not desirable traits in anyone, including God.<sup>44</sup> However, what Dennett and the other new atheists fail to recognize is how the Hebrew Bible places God on a plain above human beings.<sup>45</sup> God, being omniscient, omnipotent, and infinitely just will always do what is right (Gen. 18:25). So when God expresses jealousy, it is possibly because the greatest possible being should be jealous for his own glory so that the praise and efforts of those who worship him will not be wasted on inanimate things, which they often were. After all, the Israelites were in a constant state of violating the covenant relationship (another ANE concept that is foreign to modern westerners) they had with God so he had every right to react the way that he did.<sup>46</sup> The new atheist often sympathizes with the poor Canaanites who were driven from their land; however, the biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty is the basis upon which Christians conclude that he had every right as king over all life to eliminate the extremely wicked Canaanite culture. It may not

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>44</sup> Dennett, 265.

<sup>45</sup> Copan, 25.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 15. Although Copan disagrees that God is "jealous," the Hebrew Bible clearly presents him as such. The problem, however, is in recognizing that Yahweh and humans were not on the same level so far as the law was concerned. For a human to be jealous is prideful, but for God to be prideful or jealous only makes sense since he is the greatest being and the suzerain of the covenant with his people. It would be treasonous to his own nature for Yahweh not to express divine jealousy as a means of self-revelation to his people when they practiced idolatry.

always be immediately apparent to the reader why God chose to give life to some and not others, but it is apparent to the theologian that God has the right to do so whenever he chooses so long as his choice is not in conflict with any of his essential attributes, like holiness.

There are many who desire to write the words "return to sender" on the front cover of Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*. In it he consistently mischaracterizes Christianity—so much so that I doubt his letter has been very effective with Christians of even moderate intellectual ilk. One of Harris's clever moves is to tear 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 horrifically out of context by using the sly technique of placing ellipses in just the right places to make the text appear to say something that it does not.<sup>47</sup> Harris's major error with regard to biblical theology, however, is found on page eight where he suggests that modern believers should stone their disobedient children to death based on the Mosaic Law.<sup>48</sup> Jesus openly nullified the regulations of the Mosaic Law repeatedly in the Gospels on the grounds that it was only a guide that pointed to him. The Law was also a presentation of Yahweh's serious attitude toward sin and separation from the surrounding ANE culture—this is not to say, however, that the Law was not to be taken literally by the Jews.

### **The New Atheist's Ignorance of Ancient Near Eastern Culture**

Copan rightly states, "We must allow the OT ethical discussion to begin within an ANE setting, not a post-Enlightenment one."<sup>49</sup> In our modern mindsets it is difficult to see any justification for the Mosaic Law, God's attitude toward non-Israelites, or the God-condoned practices of warfare. Thankfully, significant research has been done in the ancient world and we have a good idea of how the practices of the non-Israelite cultures compare to those of the Israelites. What scholars have found is that the Mosaic Law demands that the Israelites follow a much higher moral standard than does any

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<sup>47</sup> Harris, 13-14. Harris proceeds to use his egregious misinterpretation of the text to justify the inquisition.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Copan, 15.

other law code in the ANE.<sup>50</sup> Copan notes, "While the new atheists would consider the Mosaic Law to be ruthless and strict, there is an aspect to it that accommodates a morally-undeveloped ANE cultural mindset."<sup>51</sup> The purpose of the Law, therefore, was to provide a moral compass for Israel to move from a dehumanizing state of existence to a humanizing one.<sup>52</sup>

As for Dawkins's accusation that Yahweh is a racist, one need only point out how many foreigners God worked with throughout the time period of the Old Testament to accomplish his purposes (i.e. Ruth, King Cyrus, the Ninevites, the widow of Zarephath and Moses' African wife to name only a handful). What Dawkins's is mistaking for xenophobia is actually the outworking of God's covenantal relationship with Israel. Covenants, as social contracts, were breakable in many cases only by death. Both parties had a relationship responsibility to one another that was not to be abrogated. God's covenant with Israel stems from his covenant with Abraham, whom he promised to give the land of the Levant. In order to fulfill this promise, God drove out the extremely wicked Canaanites and took many of their lives in the process.<sup>53</sup> However, killing the Canaanites had more to do with eradicating paganism than it did with relocating people.<sup>54</sup> That total war was a dictate of gods and kings was understood well by ANE societies, despite the suffering it nearly always caused.

The new atheist may feel sorry for the Canaanites, but this feeling carries no weight since we cannot know now what God knew then about the Canaanites when he made the decision to destroy and dislocate them. The Canaanite women were not without fault simply because they were not as effective fighters as their husbands. One has to wonder how God could allow the murdering of infants and children, though. Copan makes a great point—"What then of the children? Death would be a mercy, as they would be ushered into the presence of God and spared the corrupting influences of a morally

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 17-19.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 12. Copan notes, "Unlike the new atheists, we should not approach the Law of Moses as a holiness code detached from its broader narrative and canonical context—as though this legislation offers an ultimate ethic with nothing further to consider."

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



decadent culture."<sup>55</sup> The question of slavery still remains, however. Compared with the practices of slavery in non-Hebrew ANE kingdoms, Mosaicly condoned slavery is far less severe. There are several casuistic laws regarding the treatment of slaves, who were to also reap the benefits of the Sabbath and Jubilee precepts. Again, slavery is not ideal, but Mosaic slavery is extremely generous compared to that of other ANE societies. The world of the ANE was one of intense brutality and immorality, but the Hebrew Bible presents a model that is a significant step up on the ethical ladder—pointing its readers to a future ideal by taking the progressive steps necessary to one day reach that ideal. One may ask how Yahweh is justified in replacing a greater evil with a lesser one, since it is still evil, but it is important to remember that God was accommodating a depraved culture that, without this accommodation, would never have matured.

In light of the above information regarding the Hebrew Bible, Christian theology, and comparative ANE studies, it can be clearly seen that 8) holds true and that the new atheist's ignorance concerning scholarship in these disciplines keeps him from making sound judgments on Yahweh or the Hebrew Bible.

### **ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PRO-YAHWIST THEODICY**

Since 7) and 8) are both shown to be true, it follows that 9) is true:

9) Therefore, the new atheist's anti-Yahwistic argument from evil is invalid and unsound.

#### **Amendments to the Narrower NA Syllogism**

In light of 9), a reconstruction of the narrower NA syllogism is necessary, updating premises 5) and 6):

4) If God (according to the standard theistic definition) exists, he is neither a morally repugnant being nor a progenitor of evil

10) Yahweh, the God of the Christian faith, is shown (by reading the Hebrew Bible) to be *neither* a morally repugnant being *nor* a progenitor of evil (amendment of 5)).

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 26.

11) Therefore, Yahweh does not *necessarily not* exist (amendment of 6)).

### **Possible Objections to the New Pro-Yahwist Theodicy**

We may call 4), 10), and 11) the new pro-Yahwist theodicy. The defender of the new atheist may pose the following objections:

Objection 1. A denial of 7): Many if not most modern Christians are also ignorant of ANE structures and the Hebrew Bible but gleefully accept that Yahweh has actually done the horrible things stated in its pages. The new atheist is attacking Yahweh according to the modern uneducated Christian's interpretation of Yahweh and thus is not at fault in his said conclusion regarding this God.

Reply to obj. 1: The new atheist repeatedly claims that scholars have not adequately answered their anti-Yahwistic objections, so the new atheist is apparently not appealing only to the modern uneducated Christian's form of Yahweh.<sup>56</sup> Also, even if the new atheists were appealing to the modern uneducated Christian's concept of Yahweh, he must ignore the theist's argument concerning ideal religion and its perversion by mankind.<sup>57</sup>

Obj. 2. A denial of 8): The new atheist does not need to be proficient in their understanding of ANE culture and the Hebrew Bible in order to make ethical judgments on Yahweh.

Reply to Obj. 2: If the new atheist makes specific anti-Yahwistic arguments then, yes, he does need to be proficient in his understanding of the relevant disciplines. Scientific naturalists complain that creation scientist are not true scientists because they do not always use real science, therefore their (the creationist's) conclusions are unsound. The new atheist should apply this same type of judgment to their own criticism of Yahweh and recognize that the unsoundness of their conclusions is directly related to their ignorance of the relevant disciplines. Also, Paul Copan has argued well that "naturalism's foundations cannot account for ethical normativity; theism is better positioned to do so."<sup>58</sup> Scientific Naturalism does not allow for the necessary theological structures to be in place in order to make sense of the actions of Yahweh (see above).

## **CONCLUSION**

The new atheist has many complaints about theism, most of them are old and have already been adequately answered repeatedly by theists, but a few of them approach old complaints from a new

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<sup>56</sup> Dawkins, 243. Dawkins's repeatedly refers to how apologists and Christian thinkers have not adequately answered the objections he puts forward. However, the "apologists" to whom he refers are unnamed and often appear to be run-of-the-mill uneducated Christians who you might encounter on an internet blogosphere.

<sup>57</sup> McGrath, 79-84. Reference was made to this issue earlier in this paper. Human beings have misinterpreted scripture and, in turn, formulated inaccurate conclusions concerning God. By "accurate," I mean the intended conclusion about the author that is plainly seen from the text when the appropriate research and background study has been completed.

<sup>58</sup> Copan, 34.

angle. The anti-Yahwistic argument from evil is not entirely new, but the unusual amount of attention the new atheist gives this argument warrants a response from those whose discipline surrounds the Hebrew Bible and ANE. Others, like Gregory Ganssle<sup>59</sup> have shown that the new atheist's stronger arguments do not include this one, but at least one can safely conclude that, having arrived at 11), these new opponents to theism do not have adequate grounds for such a heated anti-Yahwistic position as seen in premises 4) and 5).

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<sup>59</sup> Gregory E. Ganssle, "Dawkins's Best Argument: The Case Against God in *The God Delusion*," *Philosophia Christi* 10, no. 1 (2008): 45.

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