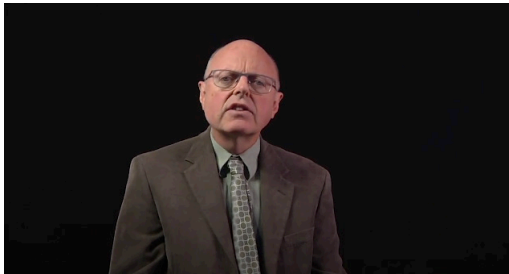


The God of the Old Testament: Problem, Approach & Context



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Hi, my name is Rick Hess, and I teach Old Testament here at Denver Seminary. It's been, oh, maybe twenty-three years, something like that, that I've been doing this. And before that, I taught in Britain and studied and worked in Britain and in Israel and in America. So one of my interests has been to look at the ancient Near East and see how it connects with some of the issues that are related to the Bible and to better understand that greater background, both in language and in culture and in all sorts of areas, in which it helps us to really understand what the writers of the Bible intended for the first generations who read and heard those Scriptures. And that helps us to better interpret it and to understand how we can answer some of the issues today.

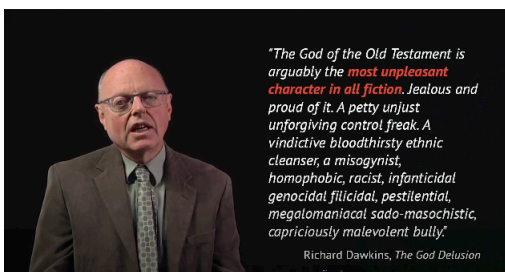
A number of years ago, I got on an airplane and sat beside a younger man, and we got to talking. And he looked over and saw I was doing some work—I had some papers with me—and asked me about it and about what I do. And I explained how I teach Old Testament and I'm looking at some material on that. And then he began to talk a little bit, and more and more, and he said, "Yeah, I know something about and appreciate the Bible. But you know one of the real problems I have with it is the way the God of the Bible seems to be sometimes so mean, so nasty, in the way in which He deals with other people." And that enabled us to talk some, and I want to share with you today some of the things I shared with him, and just talk a little bit and reflect some on what the Bible really has to say, especially the Old Testament, because that's usually where this question comes to settle.

In particular, many, many people today have problems with the Bible because it seems that the God of the Old Testament is just simply nasty and seems to be killing a lot of people and doing things that we don't want. And if that is God, then how can we want Him or seek Him? Well, there are a lot of answers to this kind of question, but that it is a question certainly seems to be clear from the Bible and from the Old Testament.



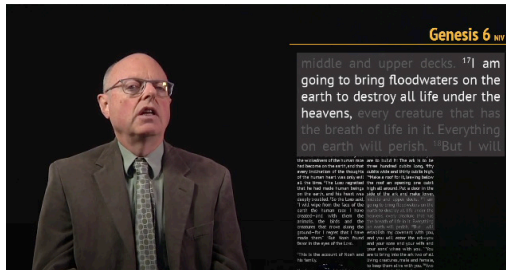
So let's look at this question. Is the God of the Old Testament a God of hate or of love? And this is a problem and issue that occurs not only at the popular level, but a number of people at a more academic level have also moved in this direction. In particular, some people who are sometimes referred to as the neo-atheists. And an example of that is Richard Dawkins, who wrote a book a few years back called *The God Delusion*, in which this quote appears: "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 misogynist, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."

Well, I'm not going to try to answer every adjective there, but I do think that a lot of this stems from the way in which God deals with people in the Old Testament and, in particular, a few texts that I would like us to look at. So we're going to have a little bit of an introduction (as we have), but start out in particular by looking at a number of texts from the first five books of the Old Testament, which is usually seen as foundational for the Old Testament and really for the whole Bible: In Genesis and the flood story there, which is often used to condemn Christians and condemn the Bible because it's killing everybody. And with regards, then, to the Canaanites and with regards to Joseph in Genesis, I want to introduce you to some thoughts there that you may not have looked at much; and then the Exodus and Deuteronomy and the laws. And then we'll spend most of our time looking at some of the issues surrounding Joshua.



I find that it is really helpful to look at specific texts and to study them rather than to make big generalizations. So I'm not going to try to look at every single issue or concern, but I'm going to look at some of the big ones that are often referred to. And one of those is the story of Joshua in the book of Joshua. And we're going to look at a number of questions there. What was Jericho? Was it a large city with lots of noncombatants and innocents? Or perhaps it was something different, like a fort. Look at the question of cities, look at Jericho and Rahab the famous figure there who was involved with Joshua and the spies and was rescued by them. And look at the issue of a king and army and the different emphases there.

And then look at Ai as well in terms of this model. And then at the great battles in Joshua (in chapters 10 and 11), and the

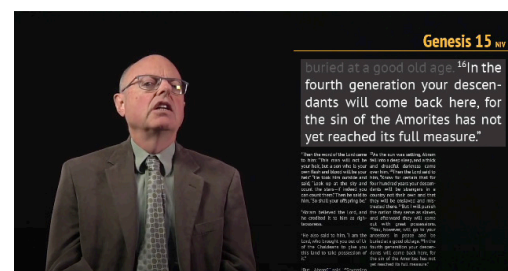
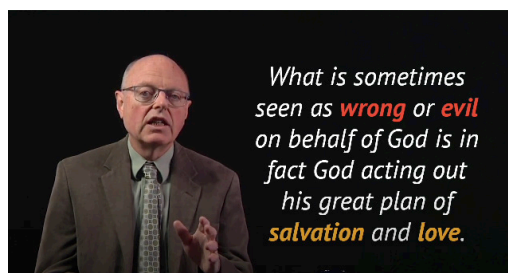


battles that, afterwards, it says, they went to different cities and destroyed them. What's going on there? So we're going to look at a number of different questions as we work through this material. But let's start with the flood because that often is itself an issue. Now, if we look at the reason for the great flood, that according to the Bible in Genesis 6–9 covered all the earth and destroyed every living creature on the earth, we have to first start with at least what the Bible says is the reason for that flood. In Genesis 6:5, we read, “The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become . . . , and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.”

Now, if we take this as it suggests, it really means that people had bent their hearts and their lives to only doing wickedness. So when we come to verse 11 of Genesis 6, we read, “the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence.” *Violence* is a key word here, which is really important for understanding why God sends the flood. “God saw [in verse 12] how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, ‘I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth.’” What do we have in this text? Every thought of every human heart was violent with murder and destruction. Humanity was bent on destroying itself and all of life.

That’s how the text describes humanity. And if we’re going to deal with the text describing the flood, we have to also accept how it describes the human race. A picture of this is already present for us towards the end of Genesis 4, where Cain’s line ends with Lamech in that line who speaks about wreaking vengeance and killing younger people, as he puts it. So sending the flood enabled God to preserve the one righteous person, Noah, and his family. And you can read about that in Genesis 6–9. And thus to preserve the human race and the animals of the earth, if we truly understand what the text is saying, it’s saying that the earth was bent on violence and destruction in terms of humanity, and they would have completely destroyed themselves and all the human race. And for God, it was an act of mercy, therefore, to preserve alive the most righteous man He found (and his family) so that they could continue the human race apart from what the human race had become, which was a place only bent on destruction and murder.

And I think this is really important to understand when we come to the flood and everything else: that, again and again, God is



acting in a way that reflects that God is a God of holiness, and He has created the world in a way that He regards; and it has its moral and ethical rules, just as it has its physical rules like gravitation. And He is a God of love from all eternity. God, the Christian God, was experiencing love and knowing love between the members of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Godhead, and then as He created humanity. But these two things are in perfect balance in God. And we don't always get them right when we try to reflect that. But nevertheless, I think we need to understand that as we go forward. And we see that, again and again, what is sometimes seen as wrong or evil on behalf of God is in fact God acting out His great plan of salvation and love.

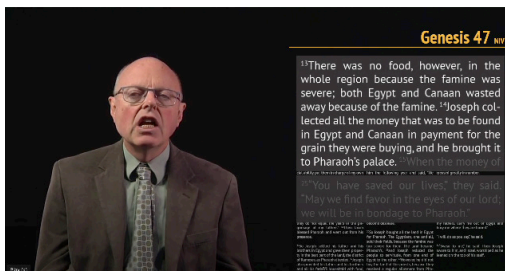
There was a rejection, in fact, violence, from the beginning. As humanity bent this way towards violence, we look at the very first covenant or relationship and promise of salvation that God makes with His people and that God made with Noah and his family. In fact, the very first use of the word *covenant* is there in Genesis 6, where it talks about God promising to save Noah and his family, and that's how He will establish His covenant. But when He talks about the covenant and since, according to the Bible, Noah and his family are the progenitors of all the human race—everyone comes from them—when He makes that covenant in Genesis 9:6, He includes this stipulation, this law: “Whoever sheds human blood by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.”

So God rejects violence, that is, the shedding of innocent human blood, from the beginning. And this is part of how he seeks to reestablish the human race on earth: that it would not become what it had been, and instead become a place where people could live and thrive. Now, as we go forward in Genesis, God speaks to Abraham, whom He calls out as part of His plan of blessing to all the nations of the world. He mentions this in Genesis 12:1–3. And a little bit later, He speaks to Abraham and He promises that Abraham would have a family and that a great nation would come from him. And He says that they will go down into Egypt. And “in the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here [that is, back to the land of Canaan], for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (15:16).

So He speaks of sin increasing in Canaan and eventually becoming really, really great and enough to bring judgment because of that sin. But let me pause there and go into Egypt with Israel. Let's go down and visit them in Egypt. Because they do go down, but first

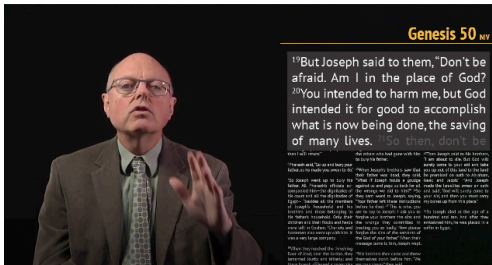
Joseph goes ahead of them. And if you know the story of Joseph, it's an exciting story to read (in Genesis 37 and chapters 39 to the end of the book), in which Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers who betray him because they're jealous of the way his father likes Joseph more than any of them. And they sell him into slavery. He goes down into Egypt, and there he is a slave. But because of the blessings that God gives him and the ability to interpret dreams, he rises until he is placed second in command to the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.

And in that situation, he interprets the dream of Pharaoh that there would be seven years of plenty in the land of Egypt followed by seven years of famine. And that's exactly what happens. And as the seven years of plenty come, Joseph collects all the food. And he has all the surplus collected, all the grain actually, in great collections. And then the seven years of famine come. When the seven years of famine come, the Egyptians come to him, but also the Canaanites come to him, and he is able to distribute that. Look at what it says in Genesis 47:13–14: "There was no food, however, in the whole region because the famine was severe; both Egypt and Canaan wasted away because of the famine. Joseph collected all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan in payment for the grain they were buying, and he brought it to Pharaoh's palace."



What did Joseph do? He sold the grain, the surplus, and thereby preserved alive Egypt and Canaan. According to this text, had Egypt and Canaan not been able to purchase grain from Joseph, they would have died and there would have been no Egyptians and no Canaanites after them. The Egyptians and Canaanites owed their life to Joseph. In fact, this is the point I believe he is making. At the end of Genesis, when his father Jacob dies and they bury him, his brothers then are very concerned because he has protected and taken care of them. But now that their father has died, they're afraid Joseph will wreak vengeance upon them because of their selling him into slavery so many years before. And so they come before Joseph, and they beg him and they remind him how much their father loved and wanted all the brothers to be together and alive. And Joseph answers them and says in Genesis 50:19–20, "But Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? [That is, can I judge who will live and who will die? No.] You intended to harm me,'" he recognizes the reality of that, "but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." And that was true. All of Jacob's family, all of the twelve brothers who would become the





twelve tribes of Israel, they were all saved alive. But I believe this reference is to more. It's to the Egyptians. It's to the Canaanites. God, through Joseph, worked mercy and love in the midst of that famine to preserve them all alive. And that sets the stage for what is going to happen.