

## **Why should I believe in a God who is recorded in the Bible as having done morally reprehensible acts?**

The Bible is raw. It does not present us with an endless series of children's stories meant to encourage us to be a slightly better version of ourselves or to make us smile. It readily gives us stories of murder, rape, and incest, and war, treachery, and pestilence. Some of this can be explained by the evil doings of humankind, but not all of it. In some cases, it is God who calls for the events that disturb our sensibilities.

"If God is like the Bible describes," some say, "I cannot believe in him." This particular position seems to go too far. There are many people in life who do things that bother us greatly, but that does not mean we don't believe in their existence. I, for one, am bothered by the leadership of Kim Jong-un in North Korea, but this does not mean I don't believe he exists. By this, I don't mean to imply that God is like Kim Jong-un, but only that dislike of another is not sufficient grounds for denying his or her existence.

But maybe by saying that one cannot believe in the God of the Bible, one is not doubting the existence of God, but only that God is not worthy of our trust given his "morally reprehensible" or "evil" behavior. If such is the case, the question now becomes whether God is indeed morally deficient. To answer that question, we must decide how to substantiate the moral standards we use to call God reprehensible.

In a wholly material world, it is very difficult to sustain the idea of morality. If we are but creatures of chance, driven by our DNA and conditioned by our environment, our actions are simply the state of affairs and not subject to any oughts or ought nots. Thus, if we are outraged by what we see in the world, we are not outraged because something defies a transcendent moral code, but only because such outrage is what our species has developed to survive at this stage in our evolution. It seems to me then, that if we are going to call God evil (who is not of our species), we must establish a morality that has a footing beyond human survival benefits.

Many have argued, and I tend to agree with them, that transcendent morals require a transcendent source, one which is not subject to any greater authority or standard. The Bible says this source is God. He is the sole eternal being. He is the creator of the universe and of the humanity that inhabits it. More than that, the Bible indicates that morality itself is rooted in the character of God and not in some third party moral force or code. We are called not to lie, because God is wholly truthful. But this may beckon the question: "But what in the character of God would justify his command to kill others, sometimes whole groups of people?"

I believe the most concise definition of God is the one he gives himself. It is one he used when speaking to Moses (Exodus 34:6-7), and it is repeated elsewhere (Exodus 25:5-6; Deuteronomy 5:9-10; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 86:15, 103:8; Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2). It goes like this: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." The first part of this definition is the part we like. We like to believe in a God who is loving and patient and forgiving. If this defined God wholly, then we can say God's violent commands in the Bible either misrepresent him or shows he cannot live up to his own standard. But the first part of what God says about himself is not the full definition. We are told that God is also judge, and while he might be slow to anger, eventually he will judge our rejection of he and his ways. If this two-pronged definition of God is

accurate and if morality is grounded in the character of God, then we must count God's acts of judgment just as morally commendable as his loving forgiveness.

Now, I admit that in our day and age the idea seeing God's commands of violent judgment as morally justifiable can be hard to swallow, but perhaps it helps to understand that God's judgment is always preceded by sufficient warning. For example, in the Bible, we see that God forewarned Adam and Eve before they ate of the forbidden fruit. He forewarned Cain before he took the life of his brother Abel. He forewarned the people of Noah's day of the impending flood during the 120 years it took to build the ark. He forewarned the people of Canaan when Israel came into the land. He forewarned the Israelites before each of the punishments meted out to them. Even now, we have Jesus' warnings toward future judgment if we do not repent. In other words, while God does judge, his heart is that we be reconciled to him before the gavel falls. As the prophet Ezekiel recorded at Israel's time of judgment, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11).

All this is to say that if morality only finds substantiation in the nature of a transcendent source, and if that source is best described as both loving and forgiving yet willing to judge sin, then God's behavior throughout the Bible is not evil or reprehensible but fully in keeping with his morality-defining character. Of course, the "then" of the above statement is contingent on the "ifs", but if the "ifs" are justifiable, then we might be in need of a significant change in perspective—one that has us not pointing the finger at God, but humbly repenting when God's judgment looms.

© 2018 John Hopper