

## Transcript 92

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. At GotQuestions.org we receive a lot of questions about things in the Old Testament, and frequently those questions have to do with why does God seem to be a very different God in the Old Testament than he does in the New Testament? So our guest today is Doctor Paul Copan. He is the author of *Is God a Moral Monster, Making Sense of the Old Testament Gods*. So Paul, I'm welcome to the show.

Doctor Paul Copan

Thanks so much, Shea. Great to be on with you and look forward to engaging these tough questions.

Shea Houdmann

Yes, so Paul has a PhD from Marquette University and he's currently a professor at Palm Beach Atlantic University, and they are now offering a philosophy of religion major at that School. So if you have any questions about that we'll include links to where you can learn more about Paul about the school and about his books in the show notes at the description on YouTube. And also at Podcast.GotQuestions.org so so Paul just to start out, my first question for you is a little more of a general one. Why would you say that God seems so different in the Old Testament than he does in the New Testament?

Doctor Paul Copan

I would say that the question is a matter of degree rather than kind, so we're not talking about two different gods, which the ancient heretic Marcion maintained, but rather what we see is that in the Old Testament God is aligning himself with a nation that has boundaries. There are punishments, civic punishments, and penalties.

Doctor Paul Copan

There are, you know, there's a nation to be protected given its national boundaries and so forth, and so God aligns himself with a political power, and that means warfare, that means punishments, that means protection from enemies and so forth. So there are these. So that's a of a different order than what we see going on in the New Testament, where God, rather than aligning himself with a nation and engaging in power and force and so forth. Comes in from the margins, Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem, not in the palace, but even though God comes in from the margins, faces human temptations, trials, weakness, dies at the hands of the Romans, laying down his life and so forth. We actually don't eliminate the use of force or or if you want to call it violence. Although God isn't called violent, that's wicked people do that sort of thing in Scripture, but God is not called violent, but God is offering is acting in account encountered violent measures too bring justice.

Doctor Paul Copan

Force will be used for, for example, Paul. When his life is under threat rather than taking vengeance himself against the mob, he leaves it in the hands of the Roman military to protect him. So it's not as though that's off limits, and you know, given the in contrast, the Old Testament no political power and

the use of force is still legitimate. So we see in both testaments that God is loving and severe. Now Paul says in Romans 11:22, behold, the kindness and severity of God, but we also see that there is a greater emphasis on, again, a kind of a ramping up of love, as exemplified in Jesus of Nazareth. But it doesn't mean that wrath or judgment go away.

Doctor Paul Copan

There is also an intensification of that as well, that that to turn away from Jesus, to like the Book of Hebrews says, is to actually incur greater wrath than there's a greater severity. Jesus is saying if Sodom and Sodom and Gomorrah and other ancient cities like Tyre and Sidon. Now, if the miracles performed in them had been performed in these cities like Beeston, Corizon of Jesus Day, he said they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes and therefore it will be much more severe for these cities in Jesus Day than it was for Sodom and Gomorrah and so forth that were that were judged. So we don't see that going away now we see kindness and severity in both testaments. And Jesus is one who's involved in that severity. Driving out money changers in the temple. He threatens to bring judgment upon this false prophetess Jezebel in Revelation 2 in in red letters that he's going to cast her on a bed of sickness and strike dead her heretical followers.

Doctor Paul Copan

So again, this is Jesus speaking. In fact, Jesus is aligned with the Old Testament judgments like Jude 5 where it says Jesus, after he had delivered the Israelites from Egypt, destroyed those who did not believe, so it's not as though it's all Old Testament is harsh and wrathful. You get to the New Testament its kind and loving. No kindness and severity are found in both, and that's the sort of thing that we need to unpack and I go into a lot of a lot more detail on that in a forthcoming book called *Is God A Vindictive Bully* that seeks to reconcile those portraits of the of the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament as being unified rather than having this bifurcation. So that's a that's something to that's coming out in October 2022.

Shea Houdmann

I had to read my, I had to, I got to read *Is God a Moral Monster* for apologetics class at Dallas Theological Seminary recently and I really enjoyed it, so I'm really looking forward to the next book as well, and I encourage our listeners to check that out. But so Paul I if I were to give you like our top three questions, we get related to topics you cover in your book, that will be our next points of conversation. So number one and this has become more frequent recently. Is the Old Testament God misogynistic, as in does he hate women? Why are some of the things said about women in the Old Testament, at least to our modern sensibilities, seems seems harsh. Seems to assign women a very low role of or very low value. What's the best way to respond to that?

Doctor Paul Copan

I tackle some of this in the *Moral Monster* book 'cause you mentioned Shea, but also I elaborate on this in the forthcoming book. *Is God a Vindictive Bully* in which I talk about how the term misogynistic is actually a false portrayal of what is going on. We see, for one thing, male and female, made in the image of God. There's a fundamental equality that's the biblical vision. We also see women who are involved in leadership positions in ancient Israel. You think of Deborah, you think of even folks like Ruth were elevated and presented as dignified and strong virtuous persons. You see, Esther, who is acting

courageously. Even someone like someone like Miriam who is part of the leadership team that brings the Israelites out of Egypt.

Doctor Paul Copan

You see various female strong female characters throughout the Old Testament, and in fact we could also talk about how the Proverbs 31 woman is one who acts very independently of her husband, who trusts in her. But she's engaged in commerce. She's engaged in purchasing real estate. She's very industrious and she is someone who has her own life, as it were. So there is in fact one scholar, Carol Myers, who had been the president of the society of biblical literature from Duke University, she contests the idea that the that that the term patriarchy applies to Old Testament Israel. She uses the term heterarchy that is women had their own distinct professions and guilds in the Old Testament and that they operated fairly independently of men in this regard, and that men had their areas of engagement, warfare, and so forth. But women had their own professional deals as singers, as midwives, as well as those who engaged in even the production of grain and things in the home that they were they had their own spheres of autonomy and and that there was a basic understanding of partnership in marriage.

Doctor Paul Copan

Usually you know in in the in ancient Israel men were seen as like the buffer between the family and the rest of society. But Carol Meyer says that this is a relatively if you want to call it egalitarian society and and more and more scholars are coming to recognize that it's not misogynistic at all. I mean, you look at the honor your father and mother, the book of Proverbs talking about paying attention to your father and mother. If you curse them then your own your light will go out. That this is something that is not just pay attention to your you honor your father, but your mother is just a piece of property or something, no. They know there is that fundamental equality and so so there that is part of the broader vision of Israel.

Doctor Paul Copan

Even if there are laws that take into account some some social structures and deficiencies in the ancient Near East, we need to keep a bigger understanding of the vision of ancient Israel, where there is this fundamental equality and also we need to keep in mind that just because things are described in the Old Testament where someone is being mistreated like the nameless concubine at the end of the book of Judges. There are subtleties within the text that actually reinforce this woman as a person of uh dignity, that was what was done against her was terrible and and created an uproar in Israel. And so, just because something is described in these narratives doesn't mean that it's being prescribed as though this is the way that things ought to be, and so that is the the fundamental picture here, and God is seeing God is the one who sees Israel as his wife. It's a covenant picture. It's a picture of love and God his routinely giving himself to the people of Israel, sacrificing himself, pleading with them, sending prophets so that they will repent and so forth so that there is this that there's this fundamental dignity regarding the female in in ancient Israel.

Shea Houdmann

I, I agree, and granted we're not denying that there are some passages in the Old Testament that are pretty hard to reconcile. Even some laws that what women being treated differently. But when I look at

the Old Testament law, you have to remember that the laws were given in the ancient Near East in a particular time and culture, cultural setting. God's desire was not to in the sense he needed to redeem people souls. And that would transform how they behave rather than giving an absolute law that would represent these absolute perfect standards on absolutely everything and to me that's been a helpful way of thinking through things that there's a specific purpose for the laws he gave, and they don't all represent exactly what God would desire for our society to respond. It's more that culture at that particular time. These were the commands and if you look at ancient Israel, the Old Testament law in comparison to the surrounding cultures, it was revolutionary and freedoms the responsibilities, the protections that it gave to women.

Doctor Paul Copan

Right, yeah? And Jesus himself said that the certain laws within the law of Moses were given because of the hardness of people's hearts, not because that this was the ideal legislation. So and we also need to understand that the law of Moses was kind of like a booster rocket, as someone has suggested, that it is something that gets Israel going. It moves them in a redemptive direction, but when Christ comes for the new covenant that you know what preceded it falls away. It's done its job. It's not that it's been unimportant, but it's done this job to prepare the way to prepare a mindset, a culture, a worldview to establish certain things so that when Christ comes, he actually moves them forward toward that redemptive goal in a way that the law of Moses was kind of paving the way for what Jesus would come to complete.

Shea Houdmann

So thank you excellent explanation. So question #2, we've just covered it basically, but I think it's worth mentioning, just the other day we received the question who this person was borderline ready to depart from the Christian faith because they read in the Old Testament this passage where a person was gathering sticks on the Sabbath to create a fire. Moses inquired of God, and God commanded this person who was working on the Sabbath, be put to death, and there are other commands in the Old Testament law that seem, wow, or even like we agree with the command, but not necessarily agree with the punishment. So what is the best response to this? To some of the laws that to us seem harsh?

Doctor Paul Copan

Right. I cover some of these things in the Moral Monster book, but I go into a lot more detail in this book, *Is God a Vindictive Bully* and I spend a lot of time on these laws and punishments. In the ancient Near East, laws like stoning this person or burning that person, etc. They were never literal, literally carried out. We do have two exemplary cases. You know, again breaking the Sabbath again something that was known not to do, and then also another you know was cursing God, blaspheming God, so there were two exemplary punishments resulting in in death, but that was not how things were generally done when it comes to adultery, even though it's technically a capitally punishable. You have 16 potentially capitally punishable crimes, but only one is always to be the result in taking of life in, in retribution and that is committing murder.

Doctor Paul Copan

If you commit murder, then there ought to be. There is no mercy for the murderer, but all of these other punishments could be commuted to some sort of a monetary payment, including adultery, which is

what we see routinely, not only in the law of Moses, but also in the scriptures beyond. So so as we as we look at the history of Israel we don't we actually don't see these sorts of punishments carried out, and it was understood in the ancient Near East, both outside of Israel and in Israel, that these were simply sending a warning signal like adultery. A bad things can happen. Don't do it is the implication. But it's not as though these were actually literally carried out. We just don't have that sort of a record of those sorts of things.

Doctor Paul Copan

And again it was just something to is like hyper hyperbole to wake people up to startle them, to to awaken them too you know that this is something that you ought to avoid, so I go into more detail on the question of laws and punishments. There can be some exemplary cases. Like I mentioned, the two of picking up sticks on the Sabbath and also the blaspheming of God, slandering the Lord, but you see in the in the early church when Ananias and Sapphira lie they try to make themselves look more generous than they really were by giving to the church. And so they're struck down by God. Doesn't mean that God does that all the time, but but it's it serves as a warning with this fledgling church to not to engage in these sorts of things.

Doctor Paul Copan

So so God will do those sorts of things, but that's not the that's not the norm, and so we see that in the Old Testament we see a couple of, you know, kind of exemplary cases. But that's not how things were ordinarily carried out, and everyone in the ancient Near East with regard to these sorts of penalties understood that.

Shea Houdmann

I remember several months ago I led our churches youth group and we did kind of a Q&A time and one person asked the question, why in the Old Testament was there the death penalty for disobeying your parents. There's a verse in Old Testament where it's not just like a one time thing, but someone who is they say in serial rebellion against their parents that the death penalty could be the result for that. And I pointed out it's like, well, good two things I want us to focus on. Here is 1, there's no record of that ever happening. There's no record in the Old Testament of anyone being put to death for being disobedient to their parents. But two, if this law were in effect now, do you think there'd be a lot less disobedient children and so is really able to help her process?

Shea Houdmann

OK, the strength of a warning tells you what God thinks about children who disobey their parents, but also, like you said earlier, it's it is a very bad thing to forsake the wisdom that they're trying to give you, but then it also is a such a strong deterrent from actually committing the act that it forbids that it has a preventative aspect to it, and I think that really helped her to understand it from that aspect, and specially the fact that like you said, we're saying earlier, there's no example in the Old Testament of that law, or that penalty actually be enforced.

Doctor Paul Copan

Right, and we could also add to that that we're not talking about some little kid who's saying, you know, I hate you to your parent to his parents after he's been disciplined, but rather this is a a middle aged

person who isn't taking responsibility for kind of pulling his weight in the family. But is is someone who is now a glutton and a drunkard. And is actually squandering his life rather than being a part of the the tightly knit family unit where everyone pulls his weight. That you're not creating a kind of a drag on the rest of the family by shirking your responsibility. So, so there's this is something very significant. Its not as though there's something of a minor issue, this is very weighty.

Shea Houdmann

Excellent clarification so so now for the most common question we get that there's a topic that's covered in Is God a Moral Monster. And that is why did God command the extermination or the genocide of the Canaanites, and so that's in the book of Joshua and also a little bit later God commands Saul to completely destroy the Malinkites, and we look at it if we could just narrow it down just to, uh, warfare, one nation attacking another, but the fact that God commands that both women and children also be destroyed in these attacks. That's what seems to really stir up more wow! Why would God command such a thing and really makes us a more emotional issue than just the fact that two nations were going to war with each other?

Shea Houdmann

So obviously we could do entire episode on this particular one, but maybe for the last 10 minutes. Let's really dive into this some. You explain it excellently in Is God a Moral Monster, but for our listeners help us to understand why God commanded that the entire Canaanite nations and the Amalekites' to be completely destroyed.

Doctor Paul Copan

Well, again to mention the this forthcoming book Is God a Vindictive Bully, I take a lot of the arguments and challenges a step further from my Moral Monster book and really elaborate on a number of these points that I think will be very helpful for the readers. A few things to keep in mind here. One there is no racial or tribal issue here in the earlier chapters of Genesis, where the Patriarchs are interacting with the Canaanites, there are good relationships and so forth. And even when there is, when there is judgment that is coming on Sodom and Gomorrah, God is willing to relent from bringing judgment, he says if there are even 10 righteous people in the city, I will relent from bringing judgment, but turns out there weren't 10 righteous people in the in those cities.

Doctor Paul Copan

So, so there is that opportunity that it's not again something when we talk about genocide we think about something as directed at a particular ethnicity, that there's an animus or hatred and and that certainly isn't the case. In fact, what we see with regard to the Canaanites is that they're engaging in practices that would have been considered criminal in any civilized society, incest bestiality, ritual, prostitution, infant sacrifice. Those are the sorts of things that had a corrupting influence. And God did not want the his plan with his redemptive plan for Israel to be thwarted or sidetracked because the Israelites were getting caught up in these sorts of practices.

Doctor Paul Copan

So God puts in motion a redemptive plan. He waits over 500 years before he actually carries it out. He, in Genesis 15:16 talks about God waiting until the sin of the Amorite is filled up or completed. So the

time was not right. It would have been wrong for the Israelites to go into the land of Canaan earlier than God had prescribed so it was a matter of waiting until the time was right and again, even as the Israelites went into the land, there was the possibility of the Canaanites joining up with the Israelites. Of course they could flee to another place, and the primary command is to drive out the Canaanites, but you see Rahab from Jericho who aligns herself with the Israelites.

Doctor Paul Copan

You see in Chapter 8 there is a group of Canaanites in the city of Shechem where they are part of a covenant renewal ceremony where Joshua is reading the law, you see the Gibeonites even though they're kind of deceptive in connecting with the Israelites and joining up with them. They are also aligning themselves with Israel and its we read in Chapter 11 it says that none of the Canaanite cities, even though they had seen the signs and wonders, they all knew their reports. Now we saw how the Lord brought you out of the land of Egypt with signs and wonders. And now you crossed the Red Sea and crossed the Jordan River and so forth. And there's this pillar of cloud by day and fire by night over the camp of the Israelites.

Doctor Paul Copan

So something is going on here. And the and the Canaanites had 40 years to recognize these sorts of things going on so, but it says none of the Canaanite cities attempted to make peace with the Israelites. Again, the implication being that was available to them. They could have done that, but again, that doesn't happen.

Doctor Paul Copan

Furthermore, a lot of the wars that are actually being fought even in even in the book of Joshua are defensive wars. So when the you know when the various kings see that the Gibeon nights have made an alliance with the Israelites they all converge and seek to to fight against the Israelites. These Canaanite kings and so forth, so you know.

Doctor Paul Copan

But let me go more to some specifics. Now, when we see that there is this warfare taking place, we also have in ancient near Eastern literature and we see it exemplified in Joshua and elsewhere that there is this strongly hyperbolic language where it says we utterly destroyed the man and woman, young and old, etc. This is what is, you know, this is hyperbole. This is what's called sometimes a merism where you talk about all the extremes that yeah, every possible scenario all people in the population they're thrown into the mix. Even though there are one, lots of survivors and we read in Judges chapter one, they could not drive them out. They could not drive them out. They could not drive them out repeatedly, and even in the book of Joshua we see where you know one city is quote utterly destroyed. You know that.

Doctor Paul Copan

The again, there's a question. How do we even interpret that term utterly destroyed and we'll talk about that in a minute. But you see a chapter later or even verses later that where even where there's a city that's been quote on quote, utterly destroyed. There are lots of survivors, so you have, on the one hand

mention of utter destruction, but on the other hand you have lots of survivors, and this is common rhetoric in the ancient Near East.

Doctor Paul Copan

All we like in our sports talk, our trash talk. Oh, we totally annihilated those guys. We totally destroyed that team, that's how it worked in the ancient Near East. Also, as part of the rhetoric, not just are there lots of survivors, but you also have language that brings in man and woman, young and old and so forth, even if those noncombatants are not present.

Doctor Paul Copan

So you'll give an example and I talk about this more in the forthcoming book. In Numbers 21 there are these two kings Canaanite and Archaic who are who are you know, the Israelites want to pass through peacefully and these kings rise up and they attacked the Israelites and it says that these you know, that their battle against them and we see that it's basically the the king. Or the Kings, their sons, and their armies. That's again, those are the ones against whom Israel is fighting. And it says they defeated them. And it uses that kind of sweeping language.

Doctor Paul Copan

Then you go to Deuteronomy 2 and three, even though the on the ground account says that they were fighting against an all male army, it throws in man, woman, young and old, on those same battle, you know those battle accounts. Clearly this is being imported into the rhetoric of Deuteronomy, which does that. It intensifies the earlier rhetoric of, say, Exodus and Numbers and intensifies things to make it look like wow. This is a really drastic scenario, man, woman, young and old, but they were not present.

Doctor Paul Copan

Some people say, well, OK, what about, what about, say, Saul and the Amalekites in in in first Samuel 15, where it man mentions man, woman, young and old, and so forth? Well, a couple of things here for one thing, of course that the Amalekites had already attacked the Israelites in chapter 14:48. That they were raiding the Israelites so God tells Samuel that you're to attack the Amalekite's. So what happens? Well in in verse five they fight at this localized battle, the they're fighting against the Amalekite's in what's called a city of Amalek. Probably this citadel or fortress. And notice too that the Kenites are there and the Israelites have had good relationships in the Kenites. So Saul sends word to the Kenites. Hey, wouldn't have a wouldn't have an issue with you. We're going to be fighting against the Amalekite's well, do you think that in this battle that women and children and the elderly are going to be at this pitch battle site? Of course not there. It's going to be against Amalekite warriors so and then get this. It's set, the narrator says, after the battle has been done that you know the Amalekite's were quote utterly destroyed and well, what does that mean? Well, it doesn't mean you know that they were annihilated because we read later on in First Samuel that David fights against an army, the Amalekite's and 400 of them end up escaping. And what's an interesting rhetorical device is this, you will have in ancient Near Eastern War texts mention of a single localized battle and then you'll have mention of this like universal conquest and that, and that's exactly which is the hyperbole, the exaggeration, where there's you know the localized battle is, you know, takes place with the Amalekite's in verse five of Chapter 15, and then Saul fights the Amalekite's from Saudi Arabia all the way to from Arabia all the way to to Egypt, which is a vast terrain and again and also David has a local battle and then fights the Amalekites' on that same vast terrain.



Doctor Paul Copan

So again, it's that is a clear exaggeration or hyperbole, you know. So what's going on is that there is this singular battle that Saul doesn't destroy the animals at this battle, and so forth, and he's chastised for it. But women and children and the elderly aren't on the you know, aren't at the battle site.

Doctor Paul Copan

And again, I go into a lot more detail on this in my forthcoming book, you know, *Is God a Vindictive Bully*, and I and I tease out a number of these scenarios and try to bring clarity to a number of these issues so. So stay tuned for the book. I think that's probably all we have time for at the moment, but unless you've got a follow-up question, but perhaps that gives us a little bit of an idea of what's going on in these ancient near Eastern war text and specifically in Israel.

Shea Houdmann

While I completely agree with everything you said and it's a good reminder of stuff I read in your book on so many follow up questions. But as you said, we're out of time, but what you just described I think it lays a really good foundation for a clear understanding of what the Bible is talking about when someone totally destroyed this. People does not mean to completely annihilate all the people and you can see that again and again and again where someone was totally destroyed. And yet there's still people left afterwards, and another good point that I've heard is that God commanded, particularly to completely destroy a Jericho and Ai. The two first cities in the conquest.

Shea Houdmann

It's sort of a warning sign to the rest of the Canaanites so you know, fleeing is an option. You do not have to engage in warfare, so even God, being a little more completely destroying the first two cities, served as a warning to prevent further conflicts for further bloodshed, hopefully encouraging some Canaanites to to fully encourage the Gibeonites to make peace and so forth.

Shea Houdmann

So even in the midst of God commanding warfare, don't mishear us to, I mean war is brutal. War is ugly, war is terrible, wars always the result of sin. But ultimately God's motives for commanding this were not for a group of people to be annihilated. No is to establish his covenant people through whom eventually the Messiah would come. So even in the midst of warfare and brutality you see hope, you see grace, you see mercy, and how God is dealing with people.

Doctor Paul Copan

Yeah, exactly, and you see how God in his redemptive purpose is. Yes, there is judgment in the short term, but the goal is that all of these nations, including the Canaanite nations, that they would be the recipients of salvation. So we see throughout the Old Testament that you know, uh, Syria, Egypt, Edam, the you know, the Philistines, the Jebusites, and so forth that the goal is that they would be included in the redemptive purposes of God. Even though in the earlier stages they are engaging in wickedness and need to be stopped, and that they're pernicious actions and they're in influences need to be held in abeyance because you know otherwise the purposes that God had for Israel to be a light to the nations

would be thwarted. It would be undermined, so there's a lot at stake. It's it's like a cosmic battle going on here. It's not just like one nation you know invading another.

Doctor Paul Copan

In fact, I talk about this in the forthcoming book too, that it's not as though the Israelites were going into this group of nations and these hapless Canaanites were just being, you know, were being attacked. It was a fearful thing to fight against the Canaanites because they had large cities. They felt like the Israelites felt like grasshoppers when they looked at them. They were intimidated by them and so there's a you know, if someone was fearful and didn't want to go to battle, God said then, then don't. But again, it required trust in the Lord. It was not something that the Israelites could pull off on their own.

Doctor Paul Copan

And then I get that's a helpful reminder too that it was a scary prospect to fight against the Canaanites, not something where they had superior military forces and everything. No, they're actually militarily disadvantaged, and so we see the power of God at work even in the taking of the land.

Shea Houdmann

So again, it's been the Got Questions podcast with Doctor Paul Copan and the author of *Is God, a Moral Monster* and author of the forthcoming book later this year, *Is God a Vindictive Bully?* So Paul, I would love to have you back on so we can talk about some of the issues that you raise in that book. So do we have a deal?

Doctor Paul Copan

We do. Sounds great.

Shea Houdmann

Fantastic, so we'll include links where you can learn more about Paul and his his books, his ministry and ... teaches, and the new course they're offering in the show notes at [podcast.gotquestions.org](http://podcast.gotquestions.org). Also on the description YouTube when this video goes live. So Paul again, thank you for being on the show today, I truly appreciate your insights and the help you've given me in knowing how to answer some of these questions better.

Doctor Paul Copan

Appreciate it. Thank you very much. Good to be with you Shea.

Shea Houdmann

This has been the Got Questions podcast. Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.