



The Atheist
Handbook

to the

*Old
Testament*

Joshua Bowen

Volume 1

An Atheist's Handbook to the Old Testament
Volume One

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Jacket art: statue fragment bearing incised cuneiform inscription of Amar-Sin, and statue of Gudea of Lagaš. Courtesy of The Met Museum, New York, NY. Images are in the Public Domain.

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Finally, to all of our supporters – particularly in the online atheist and skeptic community – I want to extend sincere thanks. I hope that this series will help make our interactions with Christian apologists more productive and meaningful.

Introduction

“Atheists don’t understand the overall point of the Bible”.

“Atheists have to read these passages REALLY out of context to come to that conclusion!”

“There *are* no unfulfilled prophecies, atheist! You just don’t understand how prophecy works!”

“If atheists understood the entire picture of the Old Testament – and how it is fulfilled and completed in the New Testament – these passages about slavery, rape, and genocide wouldn’t be so problematic for them”.

Atheists are accused of a lot of things, not the least of which is playing fast-and-loose with the Bible. Cries of “Context! Context! Context!” are waiting around every corner in nearly every debate or discussion between atheist and apologist. Social media provides a wide variety of platforms from which Christian apologists of all shapes and sizes can hurl accusations of sloppy exegesis and malicious “cherry-picking” toward the skeptic.

Introduction

To be fair, these charges can sometimes be valid; there is no shortage of hot-headed atheist trolls who seem to live only to humiliate their competition. And there is no question that there are many well-meaning atheists who have not yet been equipped with the tools necessary to fully understand some of the nuances of the Old Testament. In cases like these, an apologist with even a general understanding of the narrative of the Bible and a basic grasp of Christian theology can call out an atheist for not knowing the specific background of a passage like 1 Samuel 15 and walk away from the debate with their head held high.

Two things need to be said about these all-too-common occurrences. First, you don't need to know all of the details of a particular story to have a valid critique of many of God's commands in the Old Testament. No knowledge of the book of Enoch and the heavenly watchers is necessary to have a problem with God drowning the entire world with a flood. You can lack a detailed comprehension of slave adoption practices at Nuzi, yet still condemn the owning of another human being as property. A firm grasp on the extent of child sacrifice in ancient Palestine is not required to identify the call for mass genocide or forced relocation in the book of Joshua as a bad thing.

While you might not *need* this contextual understanding, it can certainly *help*. In fact, that is the point of this publication. *The*

Atheist Handbook to the Old Testament is specifically designed to fill the gap, as it were, between the appropriate criticisms that are made by atheists and skeptics and the contextual details that would bring the Old Testament into greater focus. If you are armed with the literary, historical, archaeological, and even linguistic data involved in a particular passage or topic, your argument is far less likely to be overshadowed by an apologist's demand for context.

For example, let's take 1 Samuel 15. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard the following interaction (or something similar):

Atheist: "Your God is good? He is the ground and basis for morality? Then how do you explain 1 Samuel 15:3? "Now go and strike Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not have compassion on them, but *put to death every man, woman, child, infant, bull, sheep, camel, and donkey*"?"?

Christian Apologist: "Do you even know who the Amalekites were? What they did to Israel? Why God commanded that they be punished? Do you know anything about the context of this passage?"

Atheist: "What difference does the context make? God commanded the Israelites to wipe out everyone!"

Christian Apologist: “So you don’t know the context, you don’t know why God commanded this... can I assume you don’t know about war rhetoric in the ancient Near East either?”

Atheist: “This is crazy. Why can’t you just deal with what I am saying?”

Christian Apologist: “I am! If you don’t know the context, you can’t properly understand what is going on in this passage!”

With this short “call for context”, the apologist has successfully moved past the incredibly problematic command of genocide that has been the topic of constant debate among scholars and theologians for millennia. Yet, as you can probably tell, the audience watching this debate would almost certainly feel as though the apologist got the better of the atheist (whether everyone would admit it or not).

What could the atheist have known that might have helped in this interaction? Well, *let’s take a look at the context*. 1 Samuel 15 is part of the larger story of King Saul, the first king over Israel. Saul has made a number of blunders and is cast in a poor light in the book of 1 Samuel. Here in chapter 15, Saul is told by Samuel that God has ordered him to go conquer the Amalekites. Now, without going into a great deal of detail, the Amalekites

were a group of people that had been opposed to Israel since as early as the Exodus from Egypt.

In Exodus 17:8-16, we can see that the Amalekites attacked Israel following their exodus from Egypt. In this famous story, the Israelites succeed in defeating the Amalekites in battle as long as Moses is able to hold his staff in the air above his head. After the battle had been won the text reads:

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write this as a memorial in a scroll, and impress it upon Joshua, for I will surely wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens.’ So Moses built an altar and he called it ‘The Lord is My Banner.’ And he said, ‘Because a hand was against the throne of Yah, *the Lord will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation*’” (Exodus 17:14-16, emphasis mine).

Now it makes sense when we read in 1 Samuel 15:2, “Thus says the Lord of Hosts, ‘I will punish Amalek for what they did to Israel, for how they obstructed them when they came up out of Egypt’. Saul is being ordered by God *to exact revenge* upon the Amalekites for what had happened generations before, and God’s command to Saul was completely in keeping with Exodus 17.

Introduction

But what about the question of ancient Near Eastern war rhetoric? I'm going to save that one for later (come on, I can't give everything away in the introduction!). But you see my point: it wouldn't take a great deal of research and reading to come away with a solid, overall understanding of the context of this passage. This knowledge would have allowed the atheist to respond, "Actually, I do know the context...now, how do you explain this call for genocide?"

The problem, of course, is trying to find a resource that brings together information about the narrative of the Old Testament, wider ancient Near Eastern history and culture, archaeological methods and data, and specific examples of commonly debated topics between atheists and apologists.

Oh, wait... you've already found it.

This publication is specifically written to give you the information and tools that you need to properly understand the Old Testament, particularly in the context of debates or discussions, be it with strangers online, friends, or even your own family. The goal is not to enable you to be arrogantly combative or antagonistic, but rather to be able to speak as a well-informed non-specialist with respect to some of these highly debated topics.

Each volume in this set will seek to provide the reader with information that takes into account at least four aspects of the Old Testament; the narrative of the Old Testament, the broader historical background, the archaeological data, and debated passages.

The books in this series will have the following layout: first, I will explain the actual narrative of the Old Testament: what is the story that the canonical or final form of the Hebrew Bible is trying to tell? From the creation of the world to the events following the return from the Babylonian exile, the Old Testament has a story all its own. In this regard, the point is not to challenge the historicity of the Exodus from Egypt or the conquest of Canaan; these are issues that will be addressed in other chapters. Instead, we want to understand the content and flow of the story *on its own terms*, much like we would study the storyline of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* without worrying about whether he was actually able to kill a giant bull from heaven.

Second, I will cover the broader background of the ancient Near East, both with respect to its history and culture. What can we say about the history of the ancient Near East? What was their religion like? Was their culture so different from what we know about ancient Israel? A broad understanding of the wider ancient Near East can place the events described in the Old Testament into an overarching framework, making it easier to

assess and contextualize its claims. This book will focus on the history of Mesopotamia, while volume II will cover other aspects of ancient Near Eastern culture, as well as Egyptian history.

Third, I will discuss the importance of archaeological evidence, including an overview of how archaeologists excavate, and examples of how archaeological data can help to illuminate questions about the biblical text.

Finally – and perhaps most importantly to the reader – we will encounter the chapters specifically discussing some of the more debated topics in the Old Testament. I will cover issues like the authorship of the Pentateuch, Ezekiel’s prophecy against Tyre, homosexuality, violence and genocide, and slavery, just to name a few. The goal is to properly evaluate the relevant texts, archaeological evidence, and secondary literature (i.e., what scholars have written about the topic), comparing them to what apologists often argue with respect to these issues. At the time of writing, there are two volumes planned for this publication. The first – the one you are in possession of – will be laid out in a way that follows the four goals mentioned above. This brings up an important point: I will be citing a LOT of scholars. If you have read my book *Did the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?*¹ you have seen that I am bound and determined to let you know what scholars in the field say about these issues. Because of this, you will find that I quote scholars liberally in the body of

the text. The rationale for this is actually quite straightforward: I am not an expert in all of the areas that I will be discussing in this series. While I am well trained in both the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the ancient Near East, there are people that dedicate their academic careers to the topics that we will be discussing. Thus, we want to see not only what the original texts and archaeological data say, but how the scholars in the field interpret that material, and what the consensus is among them.

What do I mean by “consensus”? Scholarly consensus refers to what mainstream scholars in a particular field agree to be the case concerning a particular topic.² This isn’t to say that consensus is always correct, or that academics always agree on everything; indeed, rigorous scholarly debate is a crucial part of the academic process. However, by adhering to consensus scholarship, I am ensuring that the reader is not inadvertently steered towards fringe, or disproven theories.

Chapter one lays out a detailed summary of the story of the Old Testament from creation, through the time of the patriarchs, to the Exodus from Egypt and the wanderings in the wilderness, ending at the death of Moses. The second half of the narrative will be covered in volume II.

Introduction

Chapter two will provide the reader with a general overview of ancient Near Eastern history, from the beginning of the 3rd millennium B.C.E. until the conquest of Alexander the Great.

Chapter three will cover the topic of archaeology, beginning with how archaeology actually works, as well as the history of “Biblical Archaeology”, describing its development from the early 19th century to the present day. We will then examine two well-known people groups from the Old Testament that are illuminated by archaeological evidence: the Canaanites and the Philistines.

Finally, chapters four through seven present detailed analyses of four important and oft-debated topics in the Old Testament. Chapter four looks at the question, “Did Moses write the Pentateuch?”. Through the investigation of contradictions and inconsistencies in the narrative of the Old Testament, I will consider whether it was written by one person, or if the process was more complex than that.

Chapter five covers the dating of the book of Daniel, laying out in detail the evidence for a late date of composition, along with the most common apologetic arguments and what scholars have to say about them.

Chapter six moves on to the topic of slavery in the Old Testament, including an analysis of data from the New Testament and from the Antebellum South.

Finally, chapter seven deals with the failed prophecy against Tyre found in Ezekiel 26, including information on the history of the period, linguistic evidence on the text itself, and some of the more common theological interpretations that are presented by apologists to reconcile the glaring problems that exist with this prophecy.

A few final points are worth noting before we dive in. First, unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Bible are my own. Second, in order to keep the technical aspects of the book to a minimum, I tend to use transliterations when representing foreign words. For example, instead of writing the Hebrew word for “slave” as עֶבֶד, I will write it *eved*. While this lacks some precision, I think the benefits of this type of simplicity outweigh the costs, particularly for the reader. Finally, I have opted to use endnotes in place of my more common footnotes, primarily because I am leaving the majority of the quotations in the body of the text. This will keep the main pages of the book from being cluttered with short citations.

Introduction

It is my sincere hope that this series will be immensely helpful to the atheist/skeptic community, Christian apologists, and anyone who is interested in the study of the Old Testament.

¹ Bowen 2020.

² Bowen 2020: 5-6.

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