

David Lamb: Is God Really 'Angry, Sexist and Racist'?

Evangelical theologian David Lamb tackles some of the Bible's most troubling passages in his book, "God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?" His answer: yes and no.

The book has received mixed reviews in the Christian blogosphere, but Lamb was well received when he recently spoke at a church here. Religion News Service sat down with Lamb, an Old Testament scholar at Biblical Seminary in Hatfield, Pa., to find out how believers' long-held views of a wrathful Old Testament God might waver with his findings.

Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

You write about how God "strikes, smites, slays and slaughters." Why is it important to understand why God is angry?

I think the biggest thing that God gets angry about is injustice: when poor people are being oppressed, when widows are not being cared for, when orphans are not being provided for. And those are really good things to get angry about. And let's face it: When people are angry, it gets our attention.

You write that while God "may seem sexist, He is affirming of women." What is one example to sum it all up?

The very first thing we learn in the Bible is that women are divine. They are God-like. Now, men are too, but I think most men think this already. The man and the woman, when God creates them in Genesis 1, they are made in His image. And there's nothing more positive you could say.

You also write that while God "may seem racist, He is

hospitable.” What do you think is key for people to know about cultural context in trying to understand this?

We need to go to Genesis 12, where we encounter God first talking to Abraham. He is calling the father of the nations. He wants to bless them, but he wants to bless them to be a blessing to all nations. God gets angry when foreigners are not being cared for. God wants his people to be concerned about people that are different from them.

You talk about the distinction some people make between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. How do you unify the tension between the two?

If one looks at texts in the Old Testament where God seems to be mean or violent, and people look at texts in the New Testament where Jesus is compassionate and caring for people and healing people, you can see kind of a dichotomy.

I see God in both testaments doing the same things. Jesus bases His teaching, as does Paul, on the teachings of the Old Testament. And the things that Jesus does in the New Testament—healing people, forgiving people, caring for people—we see God in the Old Testament doing the same things.

You give several examples of negative depictions of God. What are some of the biggest cultural contributions to people’s perceptions of God?

The classic I look at is this “Far Side” cartoon where God is at his keyboard, and there’s an innocent-looking guy walking down the street, and God’s got his finger over one key – the “smite” key.

I talk to a lot of college students, and a lot of people read, or are at least familiar with, books by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, the so-called New Atheists. So, you’ve got these New Atheists out there writing about some of the most problematic texts in the Bible and the Old Testament, and

it shapes culture.

You respond in the book to the New Atheist movement and to atheist writers such as Dawkins and Hitchens. What kind of responses have you received from atheists?

I sent an email to Richard Dawkins and got no response, which is perhaps not surprising. I've had some great interactions with atheists, and they love to talk about this. Some of them feel very strongly about it, which I think has been fantastic.

A lot of Christians, we do the same thing that Dawkins is doing – Dawkins just focuses on the negative texts, and Christians just focus on the positive texts. And I think Dawkins needs to acknowledge the positive texts in the same way that Christians need to not ignore these negative texts.

Kellie Kotraba is the editor of Columbia Faith & Values.