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BEARS GONE WILD: RESPONDING TO ATTACKS ON THE PORTRAYAL OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

by Jeremy Cummings

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Attacking the God of the Old Testament is nothing new. In fact, it has been taking place since the genesis of the Christian movement. The early second-century Gnostic heretics Valentinus and Marcion spouted out their hatred of what they perceived to be the hate-filled God of the Old Testament. In his modern-day classic, *Heresies*, Harold O. J. Brown summarizes Marcion's view as follows:

*The creator of this world is alien to the true God and alien to spiritual man. He is the Yahweh of the Old Testament, a wild god, one who can rage, make mistakes, and repent, one who knows nothing of grace, but only strict justice. This God is responsible for the misery of man; and he gave us the Old Testament with all its features, including the Messiah. Christ himself is not the Messiah; he did not fulfill the predictions of the Old Testament, but came to save us from the God of wrath, in whose clutches we presently languish.*¹

The tone of this view has not grown faint from the passing of centuries, its echoes only intensifying in the proclamations of the New Atheists. As the preeminent scientist and infamous atheist Richard Dawkins spews forth, "What makes my jaw drop is that people today should base their lives on such an appalling role model as Yahweh—and, even worse, that they should bossily try to force the same evil monster (whether fact or fiction) on the rest of us."²

We should take the claims of the Marcions and the Dawkinses of the world seriously, for they draw attention to biblical passages and issues that many non-Christians and Christians alike have struggled with over the centuries; and as apologists we are commanded to respond – with gentleness and respect (1 Pet. 3:15). But how do we do that?

I think it is a wise first tactic to ask someone of Dawkins’s ilk to give a specific example from the Bible of God’s alleged evil attributes. Be sure to ask what the antagonist thinks the passage teaches and implies, since most objections raised against the moral character of God begin with a misconstrual of what the Bible actually teaches. Asking for a specific example also creates space for discussion and an opportunity to demonstrate a proper approach to biblical interpretation.

An Unbearable Judgment. In a recent Facebook conversation, such an interaction occurred during which the skeptic offered the story of the prophet Elisha and the mauling of “children” by bears: “[Elisha] went up from there [i.e., Jericho] to Bethel. As he was traveling up the road, some young boys came out of the city and made fun of him, saying, ‘Go on up, baldy! Go on up, baldy!’ When he turned around and saw them, he called God’s judgment down on them. Two female bears came out of the woods and ripped forty-two of the boys to pieces. From there he traveled to Mount Carmel and then back to Samaria” (2 Kings 2:23–25).³

The atheist claimed that God’s punishment was impetuous and horribly out of proportion to the sin. And at first glance, that assessment might well resonate with many readers. Once we purpose to understand, however, what the author intended to teach in the passage, we see the falsity of the accusation. We discern authorial intent by employing the well-established tools and methods of biblical interpretation.⁴

Historical Context. First, context shows that this event occurs during a time of transition. Elijah, who had been the primary prophet of God, was taken up into heaven, and now Elisha, his apprentice, has been chosen by God to replace him. As such, God would validate Elisha’s prophetic office before both the covenant community and the world through numerous miracles, including miracles performed in the very manner of Elijah (see 2 Kings 2). Indeed, public validation constitutes the principal purpose for miracles (cf. Exod. 4:1–9; John 10:38; 14:11; 2 Cor. 12:12). As my former professor would say, “A miracle is an act of God, to confirm the truth of God, given by a messenger of God.”⁵

Literary Cues. Furthermore, the phrase, “he went up from there to Bethel” (2 Kings 2:23), raises the question, “from where?” which is answered in verse 15, the city of Jericho. Why is this important? Jericho’s significance stems from the fact that it was the first major city the Israelites captured through the miraculous intervention of God in their conquest of the Promised Land (Josh. 6). And Jericho is where Elisha started his prophetic ministry by performing a miracle (2 Kings 2:20–22). Moreover, Bethel’s significance stems from being the center of Israel’s apostasy (see 1 Kings 12:25–13:34). This scenario not only places Elisha in the company of Joshua and Elijah but also signifies his mission as a prophet of God to take back the Promised Land from *idolatrous* Israelites and return it to *God-fearing* Israelites. It is also important to note here that the names Joshua and Elisha have very similar meanings. The former means, “Yahweh is Salvation,” while the latter means, “Elohim is Salvation,” both names signifying the prophets’ God-given calling and God’s ultimate purpose for this text.

After performing the miracle in Jericho, Elisha was on his way to Bethel when he was confronted by some “young boys” who “came out of the city” (2 Kings 2:23). What is key to recognize here is that Elisha had just performed the miracle of purifying Jericho’s water supply so that it would “no longer cause death or fail to produce crops” (v. 21). In other words, God through Elisha had just given life to the people of Jericho, yet it was boys from among these people who follow Elisha out of the city to taunt him.

But it gets worse. Jeering at him, the boys say, “Go on up, baldy! Go on up, baldy!” (v. 23). Although antagonists claim these individuals are just kids making innocuous fun of a man suffering from male pattern baldness, such an interpretation doesn’t accord with what has taken place so far in the passage, nor does it match the use of the term “baldy” within the historical context. As Old

Testament scholar Thomas L. Constable observes: “The epithet baldhead may allude to lepers who had to shave their heads and were considered detestable outcasts. Or it may simply have been a form of scorn, for baldness was undesirable (cf. Isa. 3:17, 24).

Since it was customary for men to cover their heads, the young men probably could not tell if Elisha was bald or not. They regarded God’s prophet with contempt.”⁶ Moreover, “Go on up...Go on up” derisively alludes to Elijah’s ascent to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). The writer, then, depicts the boys as deliberately mocking the prophet of God and his work; but since the prophet represents God, these insults reveal utter contempt for God Himself.

Innocent Children? Antagonists often assume the phrase “young boys” refers to little children who didn’t know any better. Although the Hebrew words could be translated as “small children” or “little boys,” they can also be translated as “young men” or

“teenagers,” which is in fact the meaning that best accords with the determinative context.⁷ To paint an anachronistic but visceral picture, imagine fifty young gang members pursuing you as you leave their neighborhood! Given the contextual and literary details, the best interpretation is that the writer portrays these individuals as morally responsible young men who knew what they were doing when they intentionally left their city and went after Elisha to mock him and blaspheme God, a sin punishable by death (see Lev. 24:16).

Bear Facts. Finally, the text states, “Two female bears came out of the woods and ripped forty-two of the boys to pieces” (2 Kings 2:24). Such a catastrophic mauling, of course, is not a normal occurrence. I grew up in northern Maine where there are plenty of bears and rarely would hear of a hunter or someone being killed by a bear. In fact, bears are very timid animals and prefer to stay away from humans. So, how do we explain two bears killing forty-two teenage boys? From a completely naturalistic perspective, we can’t. This account serves as a severe public example of God supernaturally confirming His prophet and

vindicating the holiness of His great name (see Ezek. 36:23; cf. Num. 16; Josh. 7:10–26; Acts 5:1–11). As Leviticus had long before warned, “If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve. I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children” (Lev. 26:21–22 NIV).

Judging with Righteous Judgment. Although a skeptic might point to 2 Kings 2:23–25 as a prime example of how evil the God of the Old Testament is, in reality, a proper analysis of the text reveals a God who lovingly sends His prophets to lost and dying people to share His message of salvation. Sadly, sinful people woefully underestimate the seriousness of sin against the holy God. As Clay Jones incisively puts it, “sin corrupts our authority to judge rightly; what we think is justified prosecution against God Almighty turns out to be, on further illumination, a raucous rant full of the noxious fumes of the sinful heart.”⁸ And when one defiantly rejects God’s means of salvation, what remains is “only a certain fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume God’s enemies” (Heb. 10:27).

My hope and prayer is that instead of citing 2 Kings 2:23–25 as a proof text to condemn the God of the Old Testament, questioners will see this example of His judgment of sordid rebellion and turn to Him for salvation. For that is the very reason this specific text is in the Bible, and why God has revealed Himself to us time and again throughout redemptive history as recounted in Scripture: so that men and women

would call on “the name of the Lord and be saved” (Acts 2:21; cf. Joel 2:32). — *Jeremy Cummings*

Jeremy Cummings lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with his wife, Wanda, and their five children. He currently serves as the Upper School Spiritual Life Director and Old Testament Bible teacher at Charlotte Christian School.

NOTES

- 1 Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 61.
- 2 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 248.
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the NET version.
- 4 Good introductions to biblical interpretation include Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, fourth edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); and Hank Hanegraaff, *Has God Spoken? Memorable Proofs of the Bible's Divine Inspiration* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), part four.
- 5 Norman Geisler, class notes.
- 6 Thomas L. Constable, “2 Kings,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 2 Kings 2:23.
- 7 The biblical writer uses two different phrases to convey the age of this group of mockers, requiring context to determine meaning (cf. 1 Kings 3:7; 12:8).
- 8 Clay Jones, “Killing the Canaanites: A Response to the New Atheism’s ‘Divine Genocide’ Claims,” *Christian Research Journal* 33, 4 (2010), <http://www.equip.org/article/killing-the-canaanites/>.