



Seibert, Eric A.

Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God

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Eric Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behavior* joins a small but growing roster over the last few years of scholarly attempts to wrestle with the “dark side” of God in the biblical text. This particularly vexing issue and how one attends to it have a great many implications for not just the image of God but also the place and function of these images—indeed, much of the Old Testament—in the life of faith. What is one to do with a God who advocates ethnic cleansing or acts deceptively? How is one to make sense of a God who is in the business of afflicting God's own people or hardening the hearts of others? There is much at stake in this discussion, a point Seibert fully recognizes.

Seibert opens with a short prologue citing the story from Num 15:32–36, where a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath is stoned in accordance with the divine command. This story introduces the main thrust and problem addressed in the book: God sometimes acts in terribly problematic ways in the pages of the Old Testament, and these texts are too pervasive and oftentimes ignored by faithful readers of the text or, even worse, by churches (8–9). Following the Numbers text is a brief introduction outlining Seibert's initial experiences and struggles with such texts, the importance of thinking rightly about God, who the author hopes will read this book, an explanation for the exclusive focus on Old Testament narrative, a challenge to the view that questioning God is a problem, and a

very cursory discussion of the appropriateness of the title “Old Testament” in relation to “Hebrew Bible.”

The book comprises three parts with four chapters each. Part 1, entitled “Examining the Problem of Disturbing Divine Behavior,” introduces the reader to the central problem and previous attempts to address the issue. In chapter 1, “Problematic Portrayals of God,” Seibert assembles an impressive list of disturbing divine behavior: God is described as deadly lawgiver, instant executioner (Judah’s sons in Gen 38; Nadab and Abihu’s unholy fire in Lev 10; Uzzah and the ark of the covenant in 2 Sam 6), mass murderer (Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19; the firstborn of Egypt in Exod 12), divine warrior (a prevalent theme in the conquest narratives), genocidal general (the instruction in Deut 7; the conquest in Josh 10; the attack on Amalek in 1 Sam 15), dangerous abuser (Hagar, Abraham and Isaac, Saul), unfair afflicter (hardening Pharaoh’s heart, David’s census, Job), and divine deceiver (17–32). These passages are problematic for six reasons Seibert delineates: (1) God punishes people inconsistently; (2) God is acting unethically or immorally; (3) God kills indiscriminately; (4) God uses excessive force; (5) God offers no opportunity for repentance in some situations; (6) God in these texts appears quite unlike the God revealed in Jesus. This sixth point will form the basis for Seibert’s own proposal in part 3 of the book, a proposal that I see as inherently problematic and troubling itself for a number of reasons I will outline below.

Chapter 2 asks the question “Problematic for Whom?” which Seibert addresses again with an impressive list. Those, according to him, who would find these portrayals of God disturbing would include religious pacifists, Christian educators, general theists, feminists, groups of dispossessed people, atheists and agnostics, and people of faith (35–52). Or, to put it another way, Seibert’s list is nearly all-inclusive; anyone and everyone would (should?) find these texts disconcerting.

Chapter 3, “Ancient Approaches to Disturbing Divine Behavior,” treats ancient attempts to deal with these portraits of God. Seibert argues that even in antiquity people were bothered by these texts and thus took a variety of measures to alleviate the problem. Some, he holds, changed the Old Testament; a very fine example Seibert offers is the editorial change evident in comparing David’s census in 2 Sam 24—where God tells David to take a census and then punishes the people for it—and 1 Chr 21—where the author has replaced God with “Satan.” Another option, salvaging the Old Testament, took a variety of interpretive postures, namely, typology and allegory. Yet a third approach in the ancient world was to reject the Old Testament *in toto*. The prime example of this view is Marcion, a second-century Christian theologian who maintained that the God of the Old Testament was to be identified with evil and violence while the God of the New Testament was a God of love and peace; the two, Marcion concluded, are incompatible

and cannot be the same God, leading him to reject the Old Testament entirely as having no value or impact for Christian faith. Seibert then surveys the work of Friedrich Delitzsch, Adolf von Harnack, and Hector Avalos, all of whom he identifies as modern-day Marcionites. Seibert also offers an astute and important word of caution, suggesting that many Christians are “functional Marcionites,” meaning that, while they may not advocate eliminating the Old Testament, they follow Marcion functionally by ignoring it either in whole or in part (67–68).

In chapter 4, “Defending God’s Behavior in the Old Testament,” Seibert analyzes several contemporary approaches to dealing with the issue, none of which are unproblematic themselves due to their assumptions about who God is and who God is not. One such view is the divine immunity approach, which maintains that, since God is God and thus unable to do any wrong, everything God does is good and right. Seibert rightly challenges such a view, claiming it inhibits honest questioning and presumes we can know less about God than we actually can. The just cause approach is another possibility, arguing that God’s problematic behavior is justified given the circumstances. Again, Seibert’s challenge is an important one: Is the death of infants and toddlers ever just? A third possibility, the greater good approach, suggests that disturbing divine behavior may at times serve a greater good (i.e., the ends justify the means) and thus the behavior is justified. Another suggestion is that God may have acted differently in the Old Testament. Progressive revelation, the idea that over time God would reveal more and more of Godself, is a subset of this view. Seibert describes progressive revelation in this way:

God chose to self-disclose slowly and partially to ensure that the people of Israel could comprehend what was being revealed. Just as one cannot teach people calculus before they learn how to add and subtract, more advanced concepts about God’s character and God’s will were reserved until Israel had learned some basic theological lessons. They needed milk before they were ready for solid food—to borrow an expression from the New Testament. This gradual unveiling was necessary because Israel started with a very limited understanding of God’s ways and God’s will. (81)

A final possibility is the permissive will approach, which claims that, while God may allow bad things to happen, God does not directly cause them and is thus not responsible for them. Rounding out this chapter and the first part of the book is a treatment of “control beliefs,” which Seibert defines as “strongly held presuppositions that provide the framework within which we make sense of things” (85). Common among all the approaches Seibert surveys is the control belief that “God actually said and did what the Old Testament claims,” a belief the remainder of the book will directly call into question (86).

Part 2 of the book, “Understanding the Nature of Old Testament Narratives,” addresses and challenges the presuppositions many readers bring to Old Testament narratives. In chapter 5, “Asking the Historical Question: Did it Really Happen?” Seibert argues that some Old Testament narratives are not historically reliable and do not accurately describe events from the past. Seibert adduces two examples—Jonah and the conquest narratives in Josh 6–11—and argues through the lenses of physiology, archaeology, literary artistry, and evidence elsewhere in the Bible that there is adequate reason to question the basic historicity of these events as described. Seibert next sets out to define more clearly the genre and nature of Old Testament narrative. He offers a list of several characteristics of Old Testament narrative one must adequately appreciate in order to comprehend this genre correctly and fully. According to Seibert, Old Testament narratives reveal more about the author’s timeframe than the story’s, are more concerned with literary persuasion than historical objectivity, put words in people’s mouths, and view the world theologically (104–11).

Chapter 6 transitions to address “Concerns about Raising the Historical Question,” and Seibert here addresses head on a number of objections to doubting the historicity of Old Testament narratives. Among those concerns addressed are the fact that the text sounds historical, that it is irreverent to question the Bible, that doubt is bad, that it leads down a slippery slope and may cause one to question the reliability of the entire Bible, and that it undermines faith and biblical authority (116–22). As a way forward, Seibert suggests that readers of the Bible must recognize that “truth” and “history” are not synonymous; put simply, a story need not be historical in order to be true or communicate truth. Jesus’ parables are one such example of unhistorical stories that communicate truth. As a corollary, Seibert next articulates several inherent dangers in demanding that the Old Testament narratives are historically reliable in all facets. Demanding their historicity misunderstands the nature and function of the genre (which he treats in ch. 7), jeopardizes Christianity’s credibility by reading the Bible in a way it was never meant to be read, and distorts God’s character by allowing for unsavory depictions (124–29). In chapter 7 Seibert outlines the “Functions of Old Testament Narrative,” suggesting that they were written for the purpose of explaining national failures and disasters, to support the ruling elite and promote their policies, and to encourage particular behaviors and beliefs (132–40). A case study on the book of Joshua is offered with this rubric in mind, and Seibert contends that the book was written to legitimate Israel’s territorial expansion under King Josiah and to inculcate a concomitant sense of national identity, hope in overcoming any potential threats, and unwavering fidelity to YHWH and the laws of Moses.

The final chapter in part 2 investigates “Israel’s Theological Worldview” in the attempt to give a reason as to why such problematic narratives exist in the Bible. One reason Seibert

offers is borrowed from K. L. Noll and is called “narrative necessity”; put simply, such narratives were needed for the author to make a given story work. Seibert then turns to investigate some basic tenets of Israel’s theological worldview (151–61), which are ultimately summed up in the final view Seibert lists: God is the sole divine causal agent in the Old Testament (160–61). Ancient Israel’s worldview, therefore, differs from our own, a point Seibert supports by citing that we no longer hold to ancient Israel’s cosmology or practice of polygamy. Put simply, there are some of ancient Israel’s theological worldviews that we do not accept, and one is not bound, argues Seibert, to profess the historical authenticity of everything the Old Testament reports about God.

With this foundation in place, part 3, “Developing Responsible Readings of Troublesome Texts,” transitions to offer a solution by way of a constructive hermeneutical posture for dealing with disturbing divine behavior. At its most basic, Seibert proposes that problematic depictions of God do not in fact describe God accurately; such portraits are instead culturally conditioned and should be critiqued in light of the God revealed in Jesus. Chapter 9, “Distinguishing between the Textual God and the Actual God,” argues that the *characterization* of God (the textual God) and the *character* of God (the actual God) exist in tension with one another. One should not simplistically equate the two, but it is also problematic to deny any relation between the two. But this is only a first step. In chapter 10, “Evaluating Disturbing Divine Behavior by the God Jesus Reveals,” Seibert outlines a Christocentric hermeneutic that privileges the God Jesus reveals as the “standard, or measuring rod,” to evaluate Old Testament depictions of God (185). Seibert bases this hermeneutical posture on two assumptions: “that God’s moral character is most clearly and completely revealed through the person of Jesus” and that God is a consistent character within the pages of the Bible (185–86). When put into practice, a Christocentric hermeneutic “reintroduce[es] God” as a God of love who is nonviolent, kind to the wicked, and does not judge people through historical or natural disasters or physical infirmities (190–203). Those Old Testament portrayals of God that are out of synch with these parameters are distortions and should be rejected; readers are to affirm “This is not God!” (204–5).

The final two chapters in part 3 address how one is to put this hermeneutic into practice in a faithful and honest way. In chapter 11, “Using Problematic Passages Responsibly,” Seibert advocates a “dual hermeneutic” whereby one becomes a “discerning reader,” able to isolate that which is “unusable” and that which is “still salvageable” from problematic passages (213). These passages are not theologically worthless, contends Seibert, but one must remain mindful that not all parts of a given passage are of theological value. To demonstrate this point, Seibert offers a theological reading of the Akedah story in Gen 22 and the Amalekite genocide in 1 Sam 15, emphasizing the overwhelming importance of commitment and obedience to God in each text. In chapter 12, “Talking about Troubling

Texts: Some Practical Suggestions,” Seibert advances some practical aspects involved in dealing with the issues raised in this book, including a number of pastoral examples, such as visiting a Sunday school class or hearing a sermon at one’s home church.

Rounding out the volume are an epilogue reinforcing the central notion that not all portrayals of God are created equally and two appendices. The first appendix examines eschatological and apocalyptic images of judgment in the New Testament, which some readers may aver are so violent that even Old Testament narratives pale in comparison. Seibert attempts (somewhat apologetically, in the eyes of this reviewer) to show that, while some semblance of divine punishment in the eschaton may be envisioned, one can still affirm that God does not act in such a way in “this-worldly mode of operation” (260). The second appendix addresses the issue of inspiration, inerrancy, and the authority of Scripture.

Seibert has offered a thoughtful and careful investigation of the pervasively troubling issue of God’s behavior in the Old Testament. I am grateful for Seibert’s raising these questions and attempting to deal with them in a way that consciously seeks to honor God and the biblical text. What Seibert calls disturbing divine behavior is indeed pervasive in both Testaments, and his willingness to tackle the issue and challenge numerous preconceived notions about how to deal with such texts should be applauded.

Seibert’s is one among only a few book-length treatments of the topic, making his work a valuable part of a small but growing conversation. His prose is clear, cogent, and easy to follow, making it a joy to read. One particular aspect this reviewer found especially worthwhile is Seibert’s discussion in part 2 of the book on the differentiation between “history” and “truth,” a discussion that is not only spot-on but also an invaluable and readable way into the topic for students. In fact, I assigned my introductory course students to read part 2 of the book first, at the outset of the semester, as an entrance point and conversation starter for how one is to read the Bible. This exercise was a success, which I attribute largely to Seibert’s clear articulation of the issue and healthy use of examples—from both the biblical text and also Dr. Seuss!—to make the point. (I must fully admit that seeing “Seuss, Dr.” in the index of modern authors, immediately after Christopher Seitz and on the same page as such giants of the field as Gerhard von Rad, Martin Noth, and Phyllis Tribble, brings a large, Grinch-like smile to my face!) Professors should strongly consider using at the very least part 2 of Seibert’s book in their introductory Bible courses to provide a very accessible way into the topic of how to read the Bible that will press students to think about the issue while not advocating the extremes of so-called minimalists and maximalists.

Similarly, the breadth of material Seibert employs in making his case is commendable. His analysis ranges from ancient and modern exegetical approaches to historical Jesus study to a discussion of Marcion and Marcionism to the ever-thorny topic of inspiration and inerrancy. Seibert has surely covered all his bases and anticipated from where dissenting voices may come. He has certainly thought very carefully about this issue. Despite this deep appreciation, Seibert's work, I fear, raises more questions than it answers, and I remain unconvinced at the viability, usefulness, and objectivity of the overall hermeneutical approach Seibert advocates to adjudicate the problem.

There are several related issues I find problematic. First, I find Seibert's christological hermeneutic inadequate and worrisome. The appeal to Jesus as the barometer for who God is and who God is not carries faint echoes of Marcion and his agenda. To be fair, this is a critique Seibert addresses head-on, and he seeks to separate what he is doing from what Marcion sought to accomplish by emphasizing that Marcion advocated the dismissal of the *entire* Old Testament while Seibert only rejects *some* portraits of God. Seibert writes on this point:

Rather than rejecting the Old Testament, I have proposed an interpretive approach that can help us evaluate the appropriateness of various portrayals of God in the Old Testament. Since *some* Old Testament portrayals of God do not accurately reflect God's character, these particular portrayals should not be used to determine our beliefs about what God is really like.... Like Jesus, we too can reject certain portrayals of God without consequently rejecting the Old Testament. (211)

While I understand the distinction Seibert is attempting to make, I still struggle to see such assumptions *not* underlying—intentionally or not—what he has done. This is not to say I am calling Seibert a Marcionite! Rather, I see latent in his hermeneutical solution to the problem of disturbing divine behavior resonances of the same functional Marcionism he recognizes as embedded within contemporary Christianity.

Buttressing this point is the resemblance between Seibert's own proposal and that of progressive revelation, which he critiques and dismisses earlier in the book. In establishing the rationale for his own view, Seibert writes that some of Israel's theological worldview assumptions may be rejected "because we have more data to work with"; this additional data he clarifies only three sentences later in the following way: "Christians have the distinct *advantage* of knowing Jesus, God incarnate" (164, emphasis added). The underlying operative notion here is that Jesus becomes much more than the hermeneutical key unlocking the Old Testament. Jesus becomes emblematic of the *disadvantage* and ignorance of ancient Israel, whose understanding of God is only partial

and incomplete without this piece of the puzzle. I am concerned that assumptions such as these run the risk of leading to supersessionism and a loss of the variegated richness of the Old Testament.

Compounding this issue is a certain level of ambiguity about what Seibert suggests readers are to do with texts implicated by disturbing divine behavior. He insists that one should not “pick and choose” and that something of theological value can be gleaned from these texts, but the near incessant use of the word “reject”—coupled with the twin claims that such texts are a “distortion” of who God is and ultimately “unworthy of God” (216)—does not seem in line with this rhetoric. Moreover, Seibert’s statement that “the God Jesus reveals should be the *standard, or measuring rod*, by which Old Testament portrayals of God are evaluated” (185, emphasis added) conjures up the image of canon and is tantamount to saying “the God Jesus reveals should be *canonical*.”¹ What, then, is one to do with texts of disturbing divine behavior? Are they to be rejected, as Seibert seems to be saying often, or do they carry some theological freight? This reader is left unclear ultimately, in light of this constellation of issues, over what Seibert is advocating be done with implicated texts.

Seibert’s approach also fails to reckon with the possibility that disturbing divine behavior may in fact serve as a fertile locus for theological insights about God. By arguing that these stories do not attest to the “reality” of God, inasmuch as such a concept is accessible to humanity, Seibert drains these troubling images of God of any theological import. While he does not promote the “theological impotence” of texts with disturbing divine behavior, he does not glean anything of theological profundity from such behavior but only from the larger narrative. My own book (tentatively titled *Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and YHWH’s Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle*, forthcoming with Eisenbrauns) will, I hope, demonstrate the viability of looking at these troubling portraits of God (specifically, divine deception) in a way that appreciates their theological contributions. Furthermore, it is puzzling that, while Seibert affirms that Israel’s history is not history proper but “theologized history,” he does not wish to probe how problematic portrayals of God may make important theological claims. Does “proving” these events never happened in time and space release the interpreter from needing to wrestle with these texts, or is it adequate to say simply “This is not God!”

1. I do not mean to delve into the ever-murky realm of authorial intent and claim that Seibert *intended* any of this to be heard in such a way. Rather, in (good?) postmodern fashion I am simply highlighting what his language and conclusions evoke and what problematic implications may develop from them.

In a similar vein, despite the strength of Seibert's analysis of "history" and "truth" in part 2 of the book, he fails to follow through on its obvious implications for what he is doing. If Old Testament narrative need not be historical but can still communicate truth, and disturbing divine behavior does not provide a historically reliable portrait of God, one must still ask—by Seibert's own arithmetic—what *truth* disturbing divine behavior is communicating. There appears to be some contradiction in Seibert's own argument. Do troubling images of God not conform to the actual God because they are in dissonance with the God revealed in Jesus or because they are not historically reliable? Or, does an affinity with the God revealed in Jesus somehow render a reliable historical verdict?

Two final issues must be raised. First, Seibert's understanding of Jesus (or the God revealed in him) is too facile and one-dimensional. It is an oversimplification of Jesus' career and message. To be fair, Seibert does acknowledge, albeit briefly, the presence of disturbing divine behavior in the New Testament (184–85), yet Jesus is not mentioned as a potentially problematic character. Such a docile reading of Jesus succeeds only in domesticating a character who is surely not unproblematic. One need think only of the temple-cleansing scene, or Jesus' rude rebuff to the Canaanite woman in Matt 8:5–13, or the eschatological imagery pervading Matt 25, or the terrifying rhetoric of the Johannine Jesus in John 8:39–47 aimed at "the Jews." One may demur, pointing out that in none of these four examples is Jesus complicit in genocide, abuse, or deception. What these three examples reveal, however, is that Jesus is a far more complex character than Seibert credits him with being and is certainly one who does not always act in accordance with the checklist of behavior endemic to Jesus outlined by Seibert. Would Seibert advocate the same Christocentric hermeneutic to adjudicate between the textual and actual Jesus? This would most certainly be problematic, as one cannot successfully compare Jesus with Jesus and hope to arrive at such a conclusion. There must be another option. Relatedly, one may ask whose Jesus Seibert is advocating. Is it the Matthean Jesus? Markan? Lukan? Johannine?

Second, this reviewer is left to wonder whether a more appropriate way to address the issue of disturbing divine behavior is through an appreciation of the multifaceted view of God evident in the biblical text. At bottom, must a God in/of tension be a theological problem, be consistent, as Seibert *assumes*? (172–73, 186). Rather than couching this in terms of being an assumption, Seibert's case would be strengthened if he defended this point from the biblical text, acknowledging that God is not a static character. How, for instance, would he respond to Walter Brueggemann's astute appeal to ancient Israel's practice of core, counter, and unsolicited testimony in his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*?

As I mentioned above, I recently used this book in an introductory course alongside Terence Fretheim's *The Suffering of God* (Fortress, 1984) and Walter Brueggemann's *Divine Presence amid Violence* (Cascade, 2009) to highlight for students alternative ways of thinking about God. Despite my many disagreements with Seibert's work, I will continue in this practice for the foreseeable future. His book is a valuable resource for helping students to recognize and wrestle with disturbing divine behavior in the Old Testament. Seibert has done a commendable job of introducing the issue of problematic portraits of God in the Old Testament in a way that seeks to be accessible, honest, and sensitive to readers, God, and the biblical text. His conclusions are ones that may resonate with students, yet still push them to plumb the depths of the biblical text in a more careful and thoughtful manner. Seibert's contribution, while not without its problems, is a welcome voice to the conversation on disturbing divine behavior.