The English version of this work is the third edition of the French publication. Römer, professor at the Collège de France, wants to address questions that laypeople have about some “difficult” Old Testament texts where God is portrayed as arbitrary, vindictive, manipulative, and unjust. His aim is to provide the reader of these passages with “historical analysis, comparison, and interpretation to shed some light on some little-understood aspects that are nevertheless worthwhile” (v). By situating these selected texts in their historical context, Römer wants to aid in the discernment of those elements that might lead “to the worst historical misunderstandings” (vi).

The introduction presents a brief survey, from Marcion to Bultmann, on how problematic interpretations were given to some of God’s actions throughout the Old Testament, mainly because of the lack of acknowledgment of a historical context. Römer then discusses the development of the Israelite understanding of God, from being one among many deities before and during the monarchical period to becoming the one and only God during exilic times. Since the Old Testament does not contain one clear idea of who God is and what his plan is for his chosen people, readers need to become comfortable with a variety of images and narratives in order to understand the Hebrew Bible. Römer
concludes the introduction by including an explanation of the origin and meaning of YHWH’s name.

In chapter 1, “Is God Male?” Römer explains the existence of diverse perceptions of YHWH’s gender through the progression and the variety of theological attitudes of the Old Testament faith. Going over designated biblical references, Römer presents several images of YHWH as a male god: king, lover, husband to Asherah, and father. While acknowledging that neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament address God in the feminine, there are instances where God is portrayed with motherly qualities. Römer seems to stay away from the issue, concluding that it is better not to limit God to our human understanding and linguistic limitations.

“Is God Cruel?” (ch. 2) deals with four texts in which God is presented as either a heartless child murderer or a bloodthirsty executioner. Römer spends time commenting on Gen 22 from a number of interpretative angles while arguing that the Akedah episode is a polemic against human sacrifices. Judges 11:29–40 seems to read as a feminine version of the binding of Isaac, secondary to the original Ammonite war story and influenced by a Hellenistic “theological crisis regarding the intervention of the gods in the lives of human beings” (61–62), in which God remains silent, possibly out of disapproval. Römer finds parallels between Jacob’s struggle with the angel (Gen 32:23–32) and God’s attack against Moses (Exod 4:24–26). Römer refuses the idea of considering these two stories as ancient leftovers of superstitious beliefs. He prefers to see them as the result of postexilic reflections and urges that we not try to explain God’s every action.

“Is God a Warlike Despot?” is the title of the third chapter. Römer attributes the stout nationalism depicted all throughout the Deuteronomistic History to the influence of Assyrian ideology. Therefore the idea of God, especially in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua, through a strong literary dependence, is one of a military king offering protection and care to all those who remain faithful to him and also as a divine warrior capable of overpowering the Assyrian deities. Later on, due to the destruction of Jerusalem, some texts were included that reflect a new political situation, portraying YHWH as a wise instructor (Josh 1:8). From a warlike god, YHWH is changed by the Deuteronomistic authors into a providential liberator. Deuteronomy 7:1–6 as well as Ezra 9, while showing a concern for the loss of identity, should be read along with some later texts from the book of Genesis in which the patriarchs live in peace with the neighboring peoples (Gen 37–50). It is important for Römer to make sure the Old Testament reader takes into account the complexity of the composition and transmission of its books, lest these texts are used to justify abusive social behavior.
Chapter 4 poses the question: “Is God Self-Righteous and Humans Mere Sinners?” Römer reflects here on human freedom as represented in some texts of the Hebrew Bible. He begins this section with an extensive analysis of Gen 3, concluding that the account of “the fall” is not related with the concept of original sin. Instead it is a reflection “on the freedom and independence of human beings” (98). Thus human sexuality is not only for reproductive purposes, as the Song of Songs texts demonstrate. Regarding some Torah regulations that make the Old Testament God seem like a legalistic imposer on humanity, Römer sustains that the modern reader should see these regulations as being made for specific people living during a certain period in time.

“Is God Violent and Vengeful?” (ch.5) addresses Gen 4 as an etiological text attempting to explain the origin of violence and how to deal with it. Römer recommends reading the whole chapter in order to appreciate its true message. His conclusions on the text’s analysis are that fairness and equality should not be expected in this life and that Cain is an example of those who cannot cope with this reality. Moreover, violence is a part of being human, a reality that needs to be dealt with but not promoted. On the question whether the God of the Old Testament is prone to vengeance, Römer presents some calls for punishment and retaliation in the book of Psalms. Even if this cry is communitarian or individualistic, Römer thinks that some psalms (58, 136, 137) transfer the desire for vengeance from those who call for it to God so that he may act on their behalf. Even though God sometimes responds with violence after violence is committed (Gen 6–9), he also prescribes the end of violence (Gen 8:21).

The last chapter, “Is God Comprehensible?” (an addition to the second French edition), reflects on the suffering and pain in a world that was created good. Although the idea of retribution present in many Old Testament instances is powerful and reassuring, since it helps us to form the idea of a comprehensible God, this same idea presents a real existential problem. After commenting on the book of Job, Römer concludes that its main character abandons the former Jewish belief that God is comprehensible, an idea that the author of Ecclesiastes, on the other hand, seems to develop. This reality of a God who cannot be understood completely should not advance or allow for a fatalistic mindset. It should be considered an exhortation to accept God as one full of surprises, as Römer tries to explain using 1 Kgs 9 and Jonah 1.

The conclusion returns to Römer’s aspirations in the preface: difficult Old Testament texts that present God in a unacceptable manner for modern readers should be considered within their particular historical contexts, while keeping in mind that the God of the Old and the New Testaments cannot be labeled, completely comprehended, or subjected to any defined category.
Römer's work will be helpful for learned readers looking for supplementary answers further than what their own ideas or their religious leaders may provide. The topic of trying to understand better the difficult passages in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible is contemporary and appealing to modern readers, especially in a time when major Christian religious denominations are asked the same questions and try to provide answers to their faithful. This book also should be useful for those who share Römer’s hermeneutical choices and presuppositions, specifically the dating of many of the texts he used and analyzed to a much later period, which will seem rather debatable to some other scholars. For the same reason, this book will find more appreciation in some specific circles rather than achieving consensus with the mainstream scholarly world. Even though Römer’s historical-critical approach to the texts proves essential to his work, his hermeneutical argumentation on some texts becomes hypothetical and driven by subjective presuppositions (e.g., his arguments on Gen 3 and Ps 58). Römer does not duly consider the need of many readers who look at these texts as a whole, from within an explicit framework of faith, rendering this work rather disconnected and insufficient.