

Controversy Over God's Character

Atheists and agnostics often harbor disdain for the God depicted in the Bible for a number of reasons, leading to a consistent debate about God's character. Richard Dawkins, a prominent atheist, conveys his perspective on the God of the Bible in these words:

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.” Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), p. 31

This is the opposite of how most Christians describe God's character today. Instead of viewing God as an exacting and unjust tyrant, Christians believe the passages of Scripture which declare that God is a loving and merciful Father.

The origins of this profound controversy over God's character can be traced back to a celestial conflict between Christ and Satan, as described in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 12:7 *And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels,*

The Greek word for “war” is *pōlēmos*, which is where we get the English word for “polemic.” Webster's dictionary defines “polemic” as: (A) an aggressive **attack on** or refutation of **the opinions or principles of another**, or (B): the art or practice of disputation or **controversy**...

The war in heaven was not necessarily a “war after the flesh” (2 Cor. 10:3), but a *war of ideas*. Satan initiated a controversy by challenging the principles of God's governance and distorting His character.

The Origin of Sin

The laws enacted by a ruler often serve as a reflection of their character. If a President enacts tyrannical

laws, we will assume he is tyrannical. But if the President sought to enforce laws which were for the good of his citizens, then we could conclude that the President cares for his people. Apparently, Lucifer disagreed with God's character and His laws, as the Bible shows that he rebelled against the law of God from the beginning:

1 John 3:4, 8 ⁴ *Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law...* ⁸ *He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning...*

Before Lucifer rebelled, he held a lofty position among the angelic beings as a covering cherub. God declared him “*perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee.*” (Ezek. 28:14-15). This passage reveals that God did not err in creating Lucifer; he was originally perfect. However, at some point in time iniquity was found in him. And what was his “iniquity”? According to the *BDB Lexicon*, the word iniquity [Strong's H5766] can mean one of three things, depending on the context: (1) **Violent deeds** of injustice, (2) **Injustice of speech**, (3) Injustice, in general.

Satan's Smear Campaign

This next verse gives us a clue as to which way the evil in Lucifer's heart was first manifested: “**By the multitude of thy merchandise they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned...**” Ezekiel 28:16 .

Here we see that Lucifer was involved in “selling” “merchandise.” Obviously, he was not literally selling things to the other angels, but he was trying to sell them on *ideas*. The word for “merchandise” is *rekullâh*, a noun that is derived from the verb *rakal*, which literally means to “**go about, from one to another (for trade or gossip)**.” The noun derivative, *rakil*, likewise means “**slanderer, tale-bearer**!” Thus, it becomes evident that Lucifer engaged in spreading ideas, particularly concerning God's character and His laws, as he rebelled against them in heaven.

What was the result of Lucifer's “merchandising” of these ideas about God? Because of the ideas he spread, he had “**filled the midst of**” himself “**with violence.**” The word violence [H2555] can mean typical violence, but this word can also denote an “*unrighteous* [H2555] *witness*” (Ex. 23:1), one who brings false accusations against another (Ps. 35:11).

If we insert the potential definitions of the words from Ezekiel's passage, we could rephrase it as follows:

Ezekiel 28:15-16 ¹⁵ *Lucifer was perfect in his ways from the day that he was created, until **injustice of speech** [iniquity] **was found in him.*** ¹⁶ *By **the multitude of his slanders** [merchandise] **they have filled the midst of him with false witness** [violence], and he sinned...*

Satan's strategy to wage war against God was by spreading lies about God's nature and the principles of His government. This was the beginning of a political “war” in heaven—a *pōlēmos*—a **war of ideas**. Similar to many contemporary politicians who aim to triumph over their opponents by attacking their character and the laws they advocate, Lucifer employed the same tactic among the angels.

The Origin of Violence

Would someone spread lies about someone they love, or someone they hate? Obviously the latter. John informs us that “*Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer...*” John 3:15, and Jesus likewise said that Satan “*was a murderer from the beginning*” (John 8:44). Therefore, the “violence” attributed to Satan not only refers to his false witness of God but also indicates the deep-seated violent hatred within his heart toward God and His Son which was ultimately manifested when he instigated the Jews and Romans to murder the Son of God.

Satan's Accusations

What charges did Lucifer bring against the character of God? Scripture declares that Lucifer said in his heart: “*I will ascend... I will exalt my throne above... I will ascend above...*” Isaiah 14:12-14. After Lucifer says these things, he then declares that he will “**be like the most High.**” (Is. 14:14). Satan not only desires the power and position of God but also implies that his self-centered exaltation aligns with God's own actions. Lucifer accuses God of being a selfish tyrant who seeks self-exaltation at the expense of others. He presented this very notion to Eve in the Garden, suggesting that God withheld the forbidden fruit because He knew they would “be as gods...” (Genesis 3:1-5). Satan also denied that eating the fruit would naturally result in death, contrary to God's declaration, leading Adam and Eve to believe that the only way they

could die was if God killed them. Thus, when God appeared, "Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God..." (Genesis 3:8) Hence, we can see that **Satan's primary attacks on God's character include saying that:**

1. God does not have people's best interest at heart
2. His laws are arbitrary and have no intrinsic consequences—God externally punishes people for breaking His rules, typically in a violent manner

Essentially, Satan's charges against God align with those of Dawkins. However, is there some truth to these accusations? Didn't God command ethnic cleansings (Deut. 20:16-17), the stoning of homosexuals (Lev. 20:13), disobedient children (Deut. 21:18-21), and even people who gathered sticks on the wrong day (Numbers 15:32-35)? Didn't God become fed up with the antediluvians and instruct them to "convert or die"? When we examine many of these portrayals of God in the Old Testament, it appears that God either coerces or kills those who do not comply with His rules.

But as we saw, Scripture says that Satan is the originator of violence and death, not God. Could it be that Satan has projected onto God the attributes he himself possesses? **Could it be that the God of the Old Testament is exactly like Jesus, who said "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father..."** John 14:9. But how do we reconcile the God of the Old Testament with Jesus, the One who refused to carry out capital punishment on a guilty woman and rebuked His disciples for thinking it was God's will to call down fire from heaven to destroy those who rejected Him?

Dear reader, you have been called to pass judgment on God! God encourages you to examine His character, for **"the hour of his judgment is come"** (Rev. 14:7)—taste and see that the Lord is exactly like Jesus.

For a multitude of books and resources which help reconcile the character of God as revealed in Christ with the hard stories in the Old Testament, please visit:

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