

**Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behaviour: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).**

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Most of us, I expect, know the bitter disappointment of an anticipated treat falling flat: the carefully wrapped Christmas present that turns out to be a particularly bad Hawaiian shirt; the romantic dinner that goes belly up; the book that promises so much and delivers so little. That, I'm afraid, was my experience reading Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behaviour*. The book promises to give us a way of dealing constructively with problematic Old Testament depictions of God and God's action. In the end, it fails to deliver: Seibert's answer to the question is, in a nutshell, to reject divine violence (be it in the Old or New Testament) in favour of what he sees as Jesus' revelation of a non-violent God. While I must admit that, as he claims, Seibert is no Marcionite, the shadow, dare I say spectre, of Marcion looms large in this book. Let me begin, however, by outlining his argument, before moving on to a brief analysis of his claims.

The book and its argument is divided into three main sections, with two appendices. Seibert begins with an Introduction in which he reports something of his personal journey of wrestling with these texts and outlines the argument of the book, noting as he does so that his analysis will be largely confined to OT narratives. Already in the Introduction key ideas of the book are introduced (I guess that is one function of an introduction after all): he distinguishes between 'the Bible's portrayals of God and God's true character' (p.5), or as he puts it elsewhere, between 'the textual and actual God' (p.12), asserting 'that the God Jesus revealed should be the standard by which all other portrayals of God are evaluated. Old Testament portrayals that correspond to the God Jesus revealed can be trusted as reliable reflections of God's character, while those that fall short should be regarded as distortions of the same' (p.12). Herein lies my chief criticism of the book: it suggests that we have criteria independent of the Bible's own depiction of God for determining where and when and how the Bible falls short. Even his invoking of Jesus falls prey to the imposition of this external criterion on the text, as he excludes aspects of the gospels' accounts of Jesus and his teaching on the grounds that they do not conform to the God Jesus reveals. This God seems to be one that conforms neatly to the expectations of the pacifist tradition, which requires that God be non-violent, even in judgement—expectations which, of course, *neither* the OT *nor* the NT satisfy, as he frequently acknowledges. Now, while I do not believe that we can somehow divest ourselves of our background beliefs about God and other matters and come to Scripture free from all presuppositions, those presuppositions ought to be critically scrutinised in our engaging with Scripture rather than used as a preconceived norm by which to judge it. Certainly this approach of Seibert's does not conform to (more-or-less conservative) evangelical theological method; more to the point, it does not, in my opinion, conform to good scholarly practice. But let me outline the book's argument.

Part 1: 'Examining the Problem of Divine Behaviour' seeks to identify and begin to discuss the 'problem' of God and God's action in OT narrative. Chapter 1 catalogues a range of problematic portrayals of God in the OT, while chapter 2 presents a range of people for whom these portraits are problematic, including Christian pacifists and feminists. Chapters 3 and 4 outline attempts to deal with these texts through Christian history and in the contemporary theological scene, respectively.

Seibert judges each of these attempts as unsatisfactory. Part 2: 'Understanding the Nature of Old Testament Narratives', takes a step back to examine issues of genre, historiography and theological worldview so as to understand how OT narratives functioned for Israel and how then we ought to use them. Chapters 5 and 6 outline reasons for taking certain OT narratives as being non-historical and some attempts to defend their historicity. Chapter 7 explores what he sees as the ideological rationales behind these texts: ancient historiographers (writers of apparently historical accounts), he believes, used their narratives to address contemporary concerns rather than for 'purely antiquarian interests' (p.11, c/f 131–144). I should note in passing that he seems to see these as mutually exclusive categories: that is, purely historical interest, or theological/ideological purpose; he does not seem to allow that a writer could present an account of events the past that is both true to the events and their meaning and (so) also present social and theological truth. This false dichotomy vitiates much of the argument of this chapter (and so of his own proposal for dealing with the problematic God of the OT). In chapter 8 he presents a number of aspects of the OT's theological worldview that contemporary Christians should not accept, such as the notion that God (or for the ANE the gods) rewarded the righteous and punished the wicked here and now. Once again, I should note in passing that much of this is a caricature of the OT picture of God, even that found in OT narrative: any notion that OT narrative presents a simplistic theology of monergistic divine agency, or a theology of retribution such that the good prosper and the wicked fail must be rejected by a careful reader of the texts. Whatever the book of Esther does, for instance, cannot be reconciled with (simplistic accounts of) God as sole causative agent in the world; so too, the death of Naboth in 1 Kings 21 surely discounts simplistic notions of divine retribution. Seibert's case can only stand on the basis of selective evidence which means, in turn, that his case at this point fails.

Part 3: 'Developing Responsible Readings of Old Testament Texts', presents his own prescription for dealing with the problem and so comes to the main substantive claims of the book. Chapter 9 argues, as noted above, that we must distinguish between the textual God (presented in [problematic] OT narratives) and the actual God (as God is in reality); chapter 10 presents a Christological criterion for doing so: the God revealed in Jesus is a non-violent God of non-coercive grace and this picture of God must be used to critique all other portrayals of God. Chapter 11 outlines his suggestions for how to be discerning readers, acknowledging the 'unworthy' nature of the problematic portrayals of God, but recognising that they have value nonetheless for Christian readers of the OT, while chapter 12 concludes the argument proper with some suggestions on how the Church can deal with these texts in teaching and other contexts. The appendices pick up on important subsidiary matters. Appendix A seeks to counter objections to his claim that Jesus reveals a non-violent God. In doing so he suggests that some gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching are inauthentic productions of the early church's own theological judgements, and so do not reflect Jesus' revelation of God; other problematic texts are dealt with by seeing them as depictions of eschatological judgement, which he thinks is probably best understood in annihilationist terms (and so on his account, non-violent—at least, not *historical* violence which he, for some reason, seems to think is less problematic). Appendix B presents his account of the authority of Scripture, an account which most evangelicals will (unsurprisingly) find unsatisfactory, given that it, in effect, drives a wedge between the 'human' and the 'divine' in Scripture with the result that certain texts and traditions are less authoritative and inspired than others (if at all).

Now, before I go on to some more general criticisms of the book, I should note that Seibert recognises that the story of God in the OT is not all bad news: there are positive as well as negative portrayals of God in the OT; ones that conform to (his understanding of) the God of grace that Jesus reveals. But they are, of course, not his focus. The book is also clearly written and logically structured and is generally engaging in tone. It is certainly accessible to (theological) college students; I think it could also be read by an educated 'lay' person. However, it is, I'm afraid, repetitious. Similar (or even identical) quotes, texts and arguments are found in a number of places. While some repetition

is useful for pedagogical purposes, this smacks of redundancy and detracts from the book and its argument; still, it is easy to read. However, despite its being an accessible book, it is not one I could recommend with a good conscience to someone seeking guidance on how to deal with problematic texts in the OT and their portrait of God. Some of those reasons have been noted above; let me note some others.

His argument tends to assume its conclusion, and misreads texts to support his position. For instance, despite acknowledging the importance of Job, he seems to think that in the OT all disaster is presented as God's judgement on sin. He reads Deuteronomy as presenting a simplistic doctrine of retribution (in which he is not alone, I must confess), and maps that onto the majority of OT narratives. This is clearly specious, as even a cursory examination of the career of Josiah would demonstrate. It also scarcely does justice to the richness of the OT: while he excludes the Psalms from his analysis, there is still enough in OT narratives to show that OT writers were aware of unjust suffering, even death (think, for instance, of Elijah's experience, and that of the widow he succoured and who succoured him or, more tellingly, that of Naboth in 1 Kings 21). Suffering as a result of oppression, or just the vicissitudes of human existence, is clearly within the purview of OT narrative. God is not seen as the author of such catastrophes, which means that the OT's perspective is much more nuanced than Seibert is willing to acknowledge which, in turn, vitiates his portrait of OT presentations of God and divine action in history. This relates to a general weakness in the book: he tends to read those texts he finds problematic more negatively than is warranted, even somewhat woodenly and literalistically; whereas those texts and traditions that he believes can be used to support his thesis he over-reads in its favour. Such privileging of these texts, not just theologically but also in how he exegetes them, makes it easy for him to 'prove' his case, but makes his case correspondingly weaker.

There are many other questions I would raise about Seibert's work, his assumptions and methodology: he at times seems to operate with a naively principlist approach to Scripture; he assumes that accepting divine violence means sanctioning human violence; his reading of Joshua and Judges fails to recognise the subtleties of the texts and their presentation of the 'conquest and settlement' period of Israel's life; much of the portrait of Jesus that informs his Christological reading depends upon OT texts and traditions that he rejects as problematic (for instance, the notion of the kingdom of God so prevalent in Jesus' teaching and the [synoptic] gospels' presentation of Jesus derives from motifs of Yahweh as a warrior and the day of Yahweh in the OT); for a book dealing with something so central to Christian theology and ethics he shows little understanding of those disciplines and varying positions within them. And, of course, the view of Scripture that he defends and works with in the book is alien to most forms of evangelicalism that I know. I could discuss each of these weaknesses, but I think I've done enough. Sufficient to say: I'm afraid that if you're looking for a constructive approach for dealing with troubling OT images of God, I would encourage you to look elsewhere.

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