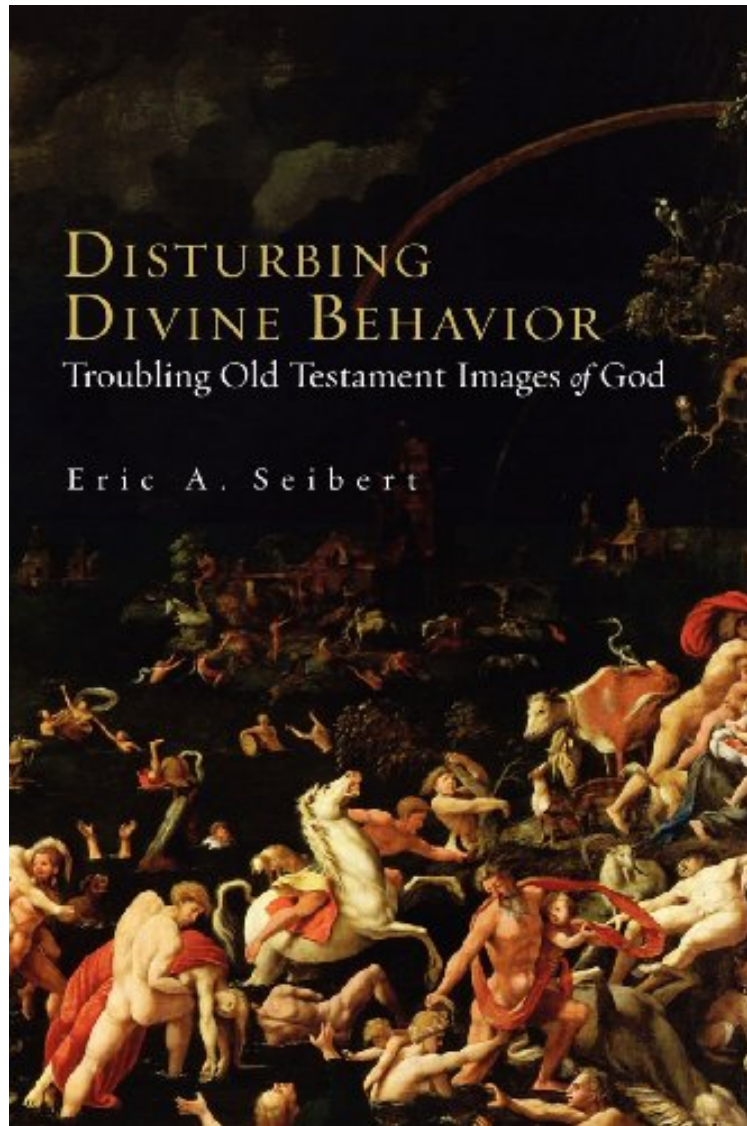


(Read and download) Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God

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Eric A. Seibert

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Eric A. Seibert : Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. How to reconcile with crimes against humanity By Paul Froehlich Readers of the Bible expect to encounter stories of human beings behaving badly, but they are sometimes

taken aback by stories depicting God behaving badly. In the Old Testament, there are approximately 1,000 passages that speak of Yahweh's anger, threats, punishments, revenge, and killing. No other topic is as often mentioned as God's bloody works. Eric Seibert, an associate professor of Old Testament, calls the troubling or dark side of God disturbing divine behavior. Some Christians who view God's character as immensely merciful, just and compassionate find it troubling when they encounter God who could also be so merciless, vengeful, violent, not to mention unjust in the mass killing of children for the sins of their parents. This book was written for those who are perplexed by and struggle with the apparent contradictions in God's character, while those who see no contradictions probably won't enjoy it. Seibert wrote the book to make sense of the contradictions and to help people think as accurately as possible about God. Who are you to second-guess God? say those who believe in Biblical inerrancy. Seibert believes Christians should be encouraged, not discouraged, to ask hard questions about God. The Old Testament provides a model of questioning God, with Abraham, for instance, debating with him about destroying Sodom. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just? Abraham asks when arguing that innocent should not be killed along with the guilty. (Gen 18:25) Moses also argued with God about destroying Israel after Aaron made a golden calf, and God changed his mind. (Ex 32:11-14) In short, there's nothing inherently wrong with raising questions about God's behavior in the Old Testament. Nor is questioning the accuracy of some parts of the Old Testament inconsistent with affirming scriptures inspiration and authority. Seibert provides a long description of disturbing divine behavior. Many readers already know about the genocide the Lord ordered the Israelites to commit on the seven nations in the Promised Land, utterly destroying anything that breathes. Show them no mercy. (Deut 7:1-2) Joshua reports carrying out the divine orders. (Josh 10:40) The rationale given for this genocide is that so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods. (Deut 20:18) At least a few readers might find genocide to be a disproportionate and extreme response to this perceived threat. In addition to genocide, there are many other examples of divine behavior that can lead readers to ask what the behavior says about the character of God: + God reportedly gave Moses 613 laws, with death required for fortune telling, cursing one's parents, adultery, homosexual acts, bestiality and blasphemy, among other things. One man found out the hard way that picking up sticks on the Sabbath also meant death. He was brought before Moses. Then the Lord said to Moses, The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him outside the camp. Which is exactly what happened. (Num 15:32-36) + Yahweh personally executed individuals on three occasions: two sons of Judah, Er and Onan, whom He had found to be wicked and displeasing (Genesis 38); two novice rabbis Nadab and Abihu - who committed a single ritual offense of making an unholy fire (Leviticus 10:1-2); and a man named Uzzah who had reached up to steady the ark of the covenant when it was being transported; he was instantly struck dead by God. (2 Sam 6:7) + Yahweh also engaged in mass killing, most notably when the great flood wiped out nearly all of humanity, when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by a rain of sulfur and fire, when all the firstborn children in Egypt were killed to punish the Pharaoh. (Ex 12:29) during 40 years in the wilderness, when Yahweh sent plagues that killed hundreds of thousands of Israelites (Numbers 26:65; 21:6; 16:46, 49; 14:36-37), and when the Lord sent a pestilence in Israel to punish King David for taking a census, killing 70 thousand. (2 Sam 24:15), even though God had incited David to take the census. + Yahweh was an afflicter. Saul sinned, for example, and the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him (1 Sam 16:14). When the Israelites tried to flee Egypt, God repeatedly hardened the Pharaoh's heart so he refused to allow the departure, while God inflicted 10 plagues on the land. Job was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil, yet was subjected by God to horrible afflictions. After Job suffers one tragedy after another, God says, He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason. (Job 2:3) What kind of God destroys an innocent man and kills his children and servants for no reason? How does one reconcile the God of the Old Testament with loving enemies, turning the other cheek, and doing unto others as we would have them to do us? Those who would deny any conflict don't want to see it. There are two ways Christians can deal with the contradictions: 1) We can simply say, when God does it, that makes it moral, even though we think bashing babies' heads against the rocks is grossly immoral any other time, or 2) We can decide we cannot accept a literal reading of the Bible and still worship God, so we discard literalism. Seibert opts for the second option. We shouldn't have to defend genocide and mass killing of children to punish their parents. It's appropriate we know war crimes are wrong. We are correct that the hyper-violent depiction of God conflicts with our image of who God is. The questionable passages are likely war propaganda, written generations after the purported events. Seibert contends the Old Testament descriptions of genocide are historically inaccurate. Archeological evidence and biblical passages indicate the Canaanites were not annihilated the way Joshua claims. So how can Christians know what God is really like? Seibert carefully considers the alternatives before finding a solution. The New Testament tells us that in Jesus, we get the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), and a revelation of God that surpasses anything offered in the Old Testament (Heb 1:1-3). Jesus said, anyone who has seen me has seen the father. (John 14:9) What about the extreme, punitive violence by Jesus described in Revelations? Seibert responds that the God Jesus reveals is known through Jesus' life and teachings while on earth, not descriptions of Jesus' supposed behavior at the end time. Consequently, Seibert recommends that Christ-followers rely upon the forgiving, non-violent image of Jesus to understand the character of God. It means applying a Christocentric hermeneutic to problematic passages, by which violent depictions of God are rejected. There are still useful,

constructive lessons to be learned from disturbing passages by discerning readers. The author understands that a believer's view about God's role in writing Scripture determines how that individual perceives disturbing divine depictions. Those who see God as the author, and writers as simply the instruments, usually accept that everything in the Bible must be accurate. Those who see God's role as inspiring, rather than dictating to, the writers, find it easier to recognize that human error was inevitable. In sum, *Disturbing Divine Behavior* explains why Christ followers should not redefine evil as good in trying to justify behaviors that are grossly immoral. One need not agree with everything in this book to recognize Seibert's careful scholarship and clear analysis of how to know divine character. ### .3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Recommended By Anthony Lawson Seibert's work is divided into three parts, consisting of twelve chapters, and two appendixes. The first two sections outline the problems related to various biblical texts and narratives from the Hebrew Bible regarding disturbing divine behavior. Such behavior includes God's genocide of people, directly killing individuals, commanding others to kill, causing natural disasters, etc. These sections are done fairly well. He then works through some of the approaches that have been proposed throughout church history to explain these portrayals and finds them lacking. In part three he proceeds to give his own explanations by first making a distinction between the textual God and the actual God, and then proposing a distinctive Christocentric hermeneutic. Seibert argues for a hermeneutic built on the statements of Jesus that he believes advocates for a nonviolent God. With this foundation he reexamines many of the texts and narratives often arguing that the text is simply wrong, that it represents how Israel saw God in terms of their own culture of the Ancient Near East. For Seibert, God is nonviolent and no text or narrative should violate that principle and if it does then it should be rejected. He does argue that even with these rejected verses we should approach the passage with humility and should attempt to find something that is theologically valuable. There are a couple of problems with Seibert's specific Christocentric approach. One issue regards the question of the historical Jesus and what we can know about what he said and did. Seibert briefly discusses the issue and doesn't see it as a major hurdle, but the situation surrounding historical Jesus studies is much more complex and nuanced. Without going into a discussion of the various quests, I'll mention just the most recent. This quest often uses what is known as the criteria of authenticity to determine what Jesus said and did, the Jesus Seminar is well known for this. This view is coming on hard times and scholars like Anthony Le Donne, Chris Keith, and Rafael Rodriguez are attempting to revitalize the quest by appealing to social memory theory. Even here the best we can do is a general outline of what Jesus may have said and did (and some scholars like Zeba Crook argue that social memory theory actually makes the quest impossible and argues for a no-quest). Another problem with Seibert's Christocentric hermeneutic is that it privileges the New Testament and leaves the Hebrew Bible unable to stand on its own to explain these various portrayals. I'm sure Jewish scholars would not agree with his explanations nor would this garner him any accolades in current Jewish-Christian dialogues. What makes Seibert's Christocentric hermeneutic distinctive? He argues that Jesus teaches that God is fundamentally nonviolent and couldn't have been guilty of any of the violent and immoral acts that the Hebrew Scriptures ascribe to him. He argues for this starting in chapter 10 and then expands on it in Appendix A, *Reexamining the Nonviolent God*. Although some Christians will find this argument persuasive, especially those from a more pacifist/peace tradition, most will not. What I found most unconvincing was his attempt to reconcile the violent portrayals of the apocalyptic passages in the New Testament with his view of a nonviolent God. The author has also written a second volume specifically dedicated to defending this position, it is titled, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy*. I'm sure a lot of Christians would have a lot of objections to Seibert's views, most centered on the topic of the Bible's inspiration. Seibert briefly mentions these issues in the main body of the text but leaves an extended discussion for Appendix B. Here he argues against strict views of inspiration, especially inerrancy and argues for what he calls a general revelation view. Despite the fact that I found Seibert's solutions ultimately unconvincing I still recommend the volume for those interested in the topic of the Hebrew Bible's portrayal of a violent God. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Not the best book, but a view that needs to be on the shelf. By John Daniel Holloway Seibert does a good job explaining the importance of thinking rightly about God (or, at least, not thinking horribly about God), citing examples of people using violent depictions of God to justify their own violent purposes. He also provides a strong case that the ways of looking at disturbing divine behavior in the OT proposed in the past are inadequate and we are in need of a new perspective. That being said, his suggestion does not provide us with anything better. He basically makes the case that the narratives of divine violence in the OT are not actual historical accounts, and that Israel was operating under a flawed theological worldview. Furthermore, Jesus shows us who God is, and that, in many ways, the way Israel thought of God is simply wrong and should be rejected. I sympathize with this view to an extent. I understand the OT to be consisted of the people of Israel trying to find out who God is, formulating different theologies as they go along. To the Jewish people, Yahweh is, in many ways, a mystery; and Jesus, for Christians, solves that mystery. So while I sympathize with this aspect of his argument, Seibert's perspective has problems. For one, he spends too much time on the historical problem. The majority of his argument is spent defending a negative view of the "historical" narratives in the OT. This fails to address Walter Brueggemann's focus, which is undeterred by historical criticism and deals mainly with Israel's testimony about Yahweh. Saying it didn't happen does not even begin to solve the problem. I suspect he spent so much time with the historical question because of his audience, which clearly consists of undergrads and lay

people; the way he writes, and the fact that most of the book consists of introductions to concepts, attests to this. He could imagine how difficult it would be for any normal, Bible-believing Christian to face Seibert's view of OT history. If this is a true assessment of his purpose, it is hard to imagine his attempt to be successful. In many places, Seibert is far too blunt to appear sympathetic to Evangelical Christians. Throughout the book, he says things that most churchgoers would be shocked to hear. Peter Enns, in *Inspiration and Incarnation*, does a good job at meeting Evangelicals at their level, and gently leading them to his understanding. The same cannot be said of Seibert. This leads me to the next problem with Seibert's perspective: his view is too minimalist to be adopted by even a good portion of Christians today. Does he really expect a lot of Christians to go along with a view that outright rejects most of OT portrayals of God? They would be forced to discard views espoused in the majority of their canon. Seibert's perspective rides too close to Marcionism for it to be widely accepted in churches. Another problem with Seibert's view is that it can't provide anything for Jewish people. I can't imagine a Jew being okay with any of the points Seibert makes, and I find it odd that an OT scholar like Seibert displays such a lack of regard for Jewish sentiments, as he demeans the ancient Jewish testimony about Yahweh, and is definitely guilty of supersessionism. My final problem with Seibert's book is technical, rather than ideological. I can't tell if Seibert was, for lack of a better word, dumbing down his language, or if he just isn't a very good writer. I don't think I've read a book in which someone repeats phrases as many times as Seibert does. Furthermore, he often included unnecessary asides to remind the reader of something that was not in need of reminding. For example, in a small section on the incarnation, he repeated again and again that Jesus was God incarnate, God in human flesh. At one point, I sarcastically asked my wife, to whom I was reading the book, "Hey, do you think he believes that Jesus is God incarnate? I can't tell." I often felt like this. (Also, he must have had a horrible editor; the book has errors on practically every other page.) Despite its flaws, Seibert's book has many strengths: his recognition of the importance of facing violent passages instead of ignoring them, as well as the importance of addressing this problem appropriately, in a way that inspires good moral behavior and a consistent theology. Also, the fact that he faces the barbaric nature of many passages in the OT, rather than pretending that they're not as bad as they are. He also assesses well the inadequacy of several other perspectives on this issue, and is refreshingly open to the findings of OT historical criticism (although, he might be going too far). Finally, I respect the amount of weight he puts on the need for a Christocentric hermeneutic. *Disturbing Divine Behavior* does not provide a bad assessment of divine violence, but it does provide another inadequate explanation. While this isn't the most well-constructed argument, nor is it the most well-written book, it certainly offers a lot of good insight on this issue, and provides an angle that, at least, needs to be on the table.

How should we understand biblical texts where God is depicted as acting irrationally, violently, or destructively? If we distance ourselves from disturbing portrayals of God, how should we understand the authority of Scripture? How does the often wrathful God portrayed in the Old Testament relate to the God of love proclaimed in the New Testament? Is that contrast even accurate? *Disturbing Divine Behavior* addresses these perennially vexing questions for the student of the Bible. Eric A. Seibert calls for an engaged and discerning reading of the Old Testament that distinguishes the particular literary and theological goals achieved through narrative characterizations of God from the rich understanding of the divine to which the Old Testament as a whole points. Providing illuminating reflections on theological reading as well, this book will be a welcome resource for any readers who puzzle over disturbing representations of God in the Bible.

About the Author Eric A. Seibert is Associate Professor of Old Testament and former Director of the Peace and Conflict Studies Initiative at Messiah College, and author of *Subversive Scribes* and *the Solomonic Narrative* (2006).