

Responding to the New Atheists' attacks on the God of the Old Testament-7: “God is Jealous” (part 1: Language and God)

Biblical statements that implicitly and explicitly ascribe jealousy to God tend to work up the puerile atheists. Richard Dawkins says that God breaks into a “monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirted with a rival god.”¹ Popular TV icon Oprah Winfrey said that she was turned off to the Christian faith when she heard a preacher affirm that God is jealous. Bill Maher of *Religulous* fame (or infamy) has said much the same thing—that being jealous about having other gods before you just isn't “moral.” The New Atheists likewise consider Yahweh to be impatient, jealous, and easily provoked—a petty and insecure deity.

What are we to make of these charges in light of the fact that the Bible does in fact list jealousy (ζήλος) as a sin in Galatians 5:20, yet at that the same time explicitly teaches that Yahweh is jealous—in fact, His very name is Jealous?

Exodus 34:14 -- for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous (נָאִיִּב; ζήλος in LXX), is a jealous (נָאִיִּב; ζήλος in LXX) God--

Before we move into the meaning of jealousy and how it has both positive and negative nuances (as we noted with “pride” in our previous study), I wish to touch on the nature of God and language—God-talk. One reason I love philosophy so much is because it enables me to understand things about God and Reality in ways that exceed the threshold of even the original languages (of which I have about 5 years of formal study of both biblical Hebrew and Greek).

Take our word “jealousy.” If you look it up in a Hebrew or Greek lexicon, you will be able to see for yourself the basic meaning that the word carries. However, it does not tell you anything about how language works in relation to God. No matter how much Greek and Hebrew one knows, that knowledge in and of itself will not tell you how language works with trying to understand and describe God and His nature. The vast majority of Christians, pastors, and seminary professors have no clue about how human language works in relation to God. Scary thought! Of course, this results in serious lack of understanding of the true nature of God Himself. It is precisely this bankruptcy in really understanding the nature of God that causes so many pathologies in contemporary Christianity. Pastors who do not take the time to really understand truth to teach and shepherd their flocks will undergo serious judgment for this neglect: James 3:1, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.” Pastors who do not challenge their flocks to step out of our culture of “Christian” anti-intellectualism to really pursue truth in *thinking about God* will have to give an account at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

¹Richard Dawkins, *the God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 243.

In understanding the nature of God, the believer must understand how language works with reference to God-talk. There are only three options regarding the use of language in trying to understand God. First there is what we call univocal language. This means that there is an exact correspondence between the words we use for things we know in our temporal earthly realm and God. This would mean that our *earthly* understanding of things like love or jealousy find a direct exact equivalence with God. In other words, God's love is exactly like the human love that we understand and experience. The second option is what is called equivocal language. This means that there is no relationship between human earthly terms and God. This would mean that "love" we understand has little to no correspondence to "love" in God. The third option is analogous language. This is the correct understanding of language when used of God. This means that we can understand God's love as analogous to human love. There is an analogy between our understanding of human love and God's love. All language that is used of God in the Bible is analogical. It is not the same (univocal). It is not different (equivocal), it is analogous (similar). Understanding God-talk is key to gaining deep insights into the true nature of God.

However, by gaining deep insights into the nature of God, we will have problems relating this to unbelievers because unbelievers (and baby believers) will have such a foreign worldview that if you say certain things you know to be true of God, it will not make sense to them and even worse: be taken the opposite way of what you mean. For example, if you told an unbeliever or baby believer that morality does not apply to God, he would very likely take that to mean that you did not think that it was right to call God moral. After all, if morality does not apply to Him then He must be amoral. Ergo, they would likely think that He could just lie or kill or that He is indifferent to morality. Yet, this is not what you would mean. In order to explain what this means you would have to go into a ton of metaphysics that would only confuse them. There are no easy ways to say what you mean given the metaphysical categories that the unbeliever or baby believer is limited to. Nonetheless, each believer must understand *Esse* for himself if he hopes live in the reality of the awesomeness of God.

Let's get back to language and God. Take the word "good." In what sense is God "good"? When the Bible says that only God is good (*ἀγαθός*, Matt. 19:17), yet man is also called good (*ἀγαθός*, Matt. 13:37; Acts 11:24), we can see the analogical language. It is not univocal, it does not mean the same thing. The good of God is not exactly like the good of anything in creation. Creation only points to Him as from effect to cause. But creation is not the same as God. Take, for example, "good" in "God is good" and "Mary is good." Shall we say that "good" here is to be understood as meaning exactly the same thing? Or shall we say that it means something entirely different? The answer is "no" to both questions. We cannot take "good" to be used univocally of God and creatures. There is only an analogy of goodnesses. God's goodness is tied into Him as *Esse/Being*. All of creation has being, but He is *Being*. Creation can do *goodness* but He is *goodness*. This goodness is not univocal. The concept is analogical. There is only a similarity. We will really unpack the concept of *Esse*, God as Supreme Being who gives existence to all things when we move into those chapters in Job where God speaks directly to him.

When Oprah Winfrey rejects that the Christian God because He is called jealous, she is thinking of Him in terms of just a Big Man/Person. When Christians do not understand the basics of language (philosophy of language), they make the same mistake. When we go to Hebrew and Greek lexicons and see how they distinguish between good pride and bad pride or good jealousy verses bad jealousy, they give evidence that no one can escape doing philosophy. However, it is unfortunate that they are at a loss of really what is going on. The problem lies in failure to understand *Esse* and Classical theism and philosophical realism.

On the Glory Road,

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