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BOOK REVIEW

Katharine Dell. *Who Needs the Old Testament? Its Enduring Appeal and Why the New Atheists Don't Get It*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017. x + 257 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-5326-1964-9. \$34.00.

Many of the strongest opponents to religion in general—and Christianity in particular—in recent years have come from a group of writers often called the “New Atheists.” It should come as no surprise that the Old Testament has been a subject of attack from these well-known writers. Two of these individuals are Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, both of whom through writing and public appearances made careers out of spreading the message of the absurdity and dangers of religion for a modern age. This book by Katharine Dell, who is Reader in Old Testament Theology and Literature as well as Fellow and Director of Studies at St. Catharine’s College, Cambridge, positions itself as a direct response to the attacks against the Old Testament found in the most popular works by Hitchens and Dawkins.

The book is divided into two parts of roughly equal length. In the first, Dell addresses the criticisms of the New Atheists head-on by interpreting the texts they cite in light of scholarly perspectives on the Old Testament. In the second, Dell highlights passages from various parts of the Old Testament to provide a more accurate and more favorable view of the Old Testament.

Her first chapter introduces the reader to the topic of her study, to the two authors she interacts with, and places them in a historical perspective. Comparing the New Atheists’ distaste (or disdain, rather) for the Old Testament to that of Marcion, Dell points out that an unfavorable view of the Old Testament is hardly a twenty-first century phenomenon. The second chapter, still

on introductory matters, discusses the complexity of studying the Old Testament, covering in brief topics such as canonicity, historiography, redactional history, and diversity. Dell likens the Old Testament to a jigsaw puzzle, suggesting each piece is necessary for understanding the Old Testament even in part.

Chapters 3 to 5 contain Dell's responses to the use of the Old Testament by Dawkins and Hitchens. Each passage studied begins with a summary of the positions of Hitchens and Dawkins, usually with large block quotations. In many cases, Dell is in agreement with Dawkins' and Hitchens' opinion that many passages from the Old Testament are odd and incompatible with modern viewpoints (see 56, 64, 68, 71, 92, 102). However, each of her responses attempts to interpret the passage in light of its literary, historical, and theological context. For Dell, the "point" of the text is always in focus. Because of this, Dell frequently asserts that whether or not a portion of the Bible is historically true does not affect the overall point that arises from the literature (see 33, 50, 59, 69, 102, 163). Beyond showing that the New Atheists' readings lack contextual sensitivity, Dell's critiques of these two writers focus on a few key themes: they attempt to read ethics into texts that do not intend to teach ethics, they focus only on unfavorable texts from the Old Testament, and they build up strawmen to argue against. She writes, "If we choose only the morally suspect narratives, of course we are not going to get our morals from Scripture—but we could choose other parts of the Old Testament which might be morally applicable to our own lives, even if the cultural and chronological differences are still evident" (115). Overall, Dell colors the New Atheists' interpretations as being naïve readings of Old Testament texts and counters with more carefully nuanced arguments about what the texts are actually about in terms of their compositional intent.

In light of these critiques, Dell seeks to present a more favorable view of the Old Testament in the second part of the book. Here she takes a section of the Hebrew Bible and highlights passages that present a more attractive view of God. Beginning with the Writings in chapter 6, Dell highlights topics such as the ethical framework of Proverbs, the attention to the feminine voice in Song of Songs, the realistic viewpoint of lament, and the theme

of steadfast love of people in the book of Ruth. Chapter 7, on the prophetic books, focuses largely on the idea of a fair and just God in light of calls for social justice from the prophetic voices. Chapter 8 focuses on favorable texts from both the Pentateuch and historical books, such as the Joseph narrative and its theme of forgiveness, but also highlights the mixed presentations of leaders such as David in Samuel, as well as topics that are significant within the Old Testament but may be problematic today, such as the Exodus account.

Two chapters conclude the work. The ninth chapter highlights the topic of skepticism from within biblical scholarship, noting that when the New Atheists cite biblical scholarship, they do so without an understanding of the dynamics within the guild that give rise to particular opinions. In the final chapter, Dell attempts to present “A Christian Perspective of the Old Testament.” This chapter mainly deals with the New Testament use of the Old Testament, highlighting especially that it is necessary for Christians because it is the background of the Christian faith. She suggests, then, that for Christians, the Old Testament needs to be heard in full, but also engaged with critically.

The book clearly accomplishes its stated task. It is an elegant, concise, and generally straightforward response to the perspectives on the Old Testament in the writings of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. She articulately reveals that these are no biblical scholars, and when they write about the Old Testament, they do not understand a passage’s content or context. The Old Testament does not make up a significant focus of their writings, however, and it would have benefited the book to have engaged with the thesis of each of their books within the context of how they deal with the Old Testament. Because the book is focused clearly on their use of the Old Testament, this is not a major downside.

The greatest drawback of this book is that it is not clear who its audience is. It is most certainly not written for other scholars, as most of Dell’s responses arise from readings of texts that are based on ideas that would be covered in an introductory course on interpretation. This is not at all intended to be a criticism of her interpretations, which are clear and engaging, but it does

indicate that she is not writing for her peers. At the same time, it also does not seem to be written for atheists or those more familiar with Hitchens and Dawkins, as she takes a decidedly Christian perspective throughout the book. Finally, however, many of her readings are based on critical assumptions that many Christians would not share. For example, the already cited instances about the historicity of events in the Old Testament would not generally appeal to a conservative audience.

This is most pronounced in her final chapter articulating her view of the Old Testament from the perspective of a Christian scholar. In a few short pages, Dell notes that Jesus may or may not have said the things he is reported to have said in the Gospel accounts about the Old Testament. However, only a few pages later Dell attempts to bolster her argument for the legitimacy of selectivity by mentioning that “it is very much how Jesus himself used the Scriptures—in a selective way that illuminated what he had to say and how he understood his mission—and how the New Testament also handled these authoritative texts” (213). She further suggests that one should not fear critical scholarship of the Bible; it does not necessarily lead to a loss of faith. Yet the view of the Bible displayed in this book, and especially in this last chapter, is one more of admiration rather than affirmation. She shows that the Old Testament is something one should seek to understand, not necessarily to believe. In other words, if her attempt is to restore faith in the Old Testament, she has by no means accomplished this task in the book, least of all in the final chapter.

This is not a book that defends the ideas of the Bible, but rather explains them in their ancient historical, literary, and theological context. Individuals looking for a defense of the inspiration or authority of the Bible need to look elsewhere. As a clearly written and highly focused book, it may serve well as supplemental reading in an undergraduate or graduate course for non-Bible majors. This book’s major contribution is its sustained critique of the New Atheists’ hermeneutics, and as such, the book will also be useful for those who wish to see the hermeneutics of the New Atheists alongside those of biblical scholarship. However, though seemingly intended for a wider audience, this book

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may not appeal to a majority of readers.

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