

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 23 – Part 1

A Warrior God?

On November 28, the Buffalo Bills had a chance to win a football game against the Pittsburgh Steelers in overtime. Quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick threw a pass into the arms of wide receiver Stevie Johnson. Johnson was in the end zone and the catch would have won the game for the struggling Bills.

Unfortunately, Johnson dropped the pass, and the Steelers went on to win the game against the Bills. Sometime later, Johnson, well known for his outspoken Christian faith, later tweeted a message to God:

I PRAISE YOU 24/7!!!!!! AND THIS IS HOW YOU DO ME!!!!!! YOU EXPECT ME TO LEARN FROM THIS??? HOW????!!! I'LL NEVER FORGET THIS!! EVER!!! THX THO...

The headlines the next day conveyed the apparent message:

Football Player Blames God for dropped TD Pass¹

Johnson later came out and announced that he was not blaming God, but simply asking, “Why?” Still, the impression left for many was blame, plain and simple.

While in court in Newark, New Jersey this week, I overheard a discussion of this issue among lawyers, and one matter-of-factly put it, “I do not believe God cares about a football game. He has bigger things to deal with.” In this lawyer’s mind, if one prays to win and an opposing player prays to win, then there is an instant heavenly struggle over who gets his prayer answered. The heavenly struggle, he reasoned, might be more interesting than some of the football games subject to the prayers.

Leaving aside for a moment the merits of prayers for such things, and leaving aside the credit or blame that is distributed afterwards, I am amazed at how our perception of God is molded around our own minds. While Genesis instructs that God created man in his image, it seems like man spends his life in the reverse process. Man seeks to create God in man’s image.

THE PROBLEM

¹ <http://www.thegrio.com/sports/nfl-player-blames-god-for-dropped-td-pass.php>.

We constantly hold God to our internal moral standards of right and wrong. Whatever we think is right, we expect of God. Whatever we think is wrong, we disassociate from God. For example, consider what happens when many people read God's instructions to Saul about the Amalekites:

Go strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey (1 Sam. 15:3).

Many people recoil in horror; perhaps most people recoil in horror!

This act of God seems offensive not only by the moral standards of most today, but also by the moral standards Jesus taught as the true morality of God. It is Jesus who taught:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn. 13:34-35).

Jesus also instructed Peter to put away his sword when Jesus was being wrongfully arrested (Jn 18:11). It was Jesus who said,

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Mt. 5:43-44).

Jesus also gave this admonition,

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also (Mt. 5:38-39).

These teachings of Jesus seem very contrary to the Old Testament instructions of God to the Israelites prior to invading the Promised Land:

But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded (Dt. 20:16-17).

In summarizing the actions of Joshua and the Israelite army, Josh. 10:40 states,

So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but

devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the LORD God of Israel commanded.²

As we look at the lessons of Joshua, this section of study focuses on the issue of God as warrior. We examine the actions and instructions attributed to God which seem contrary to both our moral expectations of God and to the teachings of God in the New Testament (and other parts of the Old Testament) as a God of love, long-suffering and patient, seeking redemption rather than revenge.

This is not a new problem; we are addressing one that has concerned thoughtful scholars and students for millennia. One 45-minute lesson cannot do justice to the subject matter. To more fully develop the issues, we are going to divide this study into two lessons spanning two weeks. This first section (this week's lesson) having already set out the problem, will discuss the most common or noteworthy solutions offered on the problem. The second section (next week) will focus on a more precise reading of the Scriptures involved as well as a constructive analysis of rendering the problem's potential solution from the ground up.

In other words, first we dissect the opinions of others ("deconstruction") and then we try to build our own analysis ("construction"). In this approach, we mimic Aristotle who often approached thorny issues first noting what everyone else said, and then setting forth his own opinion. The merit of this approach allows a fuller examination of the problem as well as the potential solutions – always with an eye toward keeping the ideas that make sense, while cautiously removing those that do not.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

There are a number of proposed solutions to the issue of God seemingly portrayed in Scripture as at times, vengeful, a warrior, and an extremist who embraces punishments and consequences that seem to far outweigh the crime. Some of these views defend the actions of God; others disassociate God from the described behaviors. We will first look at those views that disassociate God from the actions in question. We discuss three ancient views that embraced this disassociation:

1. Scriptural rewrites.

As we remember that the Bible we have today was the product of thousands of years of copying and writing – long before Guttenberg's press of 1450 – we

² We need to be cautious about over-reading this passage as meaning that Joshua and the Israelites truly destroyed all people living in the Promised Land as opposed to all those engaged in battle. As discussed in the previous three lessons, within the context of the book, Joshua left much unconquered. This will also be examined more closely in part 2 of this lesson.

recognize that scholars must work hard to determine with precision the reading of the autograph original texts of each biblical book. In other words, if our copy of Genesis, for example, dates hundreds or even over a thousand years from when the original was written, how do scholars figure out where copying errors were made?

Scholars' tools for these challenges are many, and scholars can readily identify certain types of changes in the copies of the texts we have today. Easy changes include misspellings, transposed letters, copying the same line twice, *etc.* Another area where scholars identify changes from the original text involves scribes' edits that were copying the texts after their completion.

Scholars have readily identified areas where scribes made changes in the text as they copied various Old Testament books out of a concern for how those books portrayed God. These were scribes, generally thought to be making copies of Scripture from 400BC to about 100BC. They would modify the reading of Scripture when they thought the words might bring reproach upon the character or person of God. For example, while our copy of the Hebrew text of 2 Samuel 12:9 asks,

Why do you treat the *word of the LORD* with contempt?

Many scholars believe the original text asked,

Why do you treat the *LORD* with contempt?

These perceived changes were made “to protect God from reproach...to avoid dishonor to God or to revered persons.”³ The fact that some scribes copying Scriptures between the Old and New Testament time period felt compelled to make subtle changes to protect God's reputation, is one of the earliest examples of disassociating God from something in Scripture deemed “below” God and his character or dignity.⁴

The approach indicates that for many, going back thousands of years, an approach to the problem of Scriptural portrayals of God that run contrary to the readers'

³ McCarter, Peter Kyle, *Textual Criticism, Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress 1986) at 58-59. Changing one or more of the letters in the word is termed “*tiqqune soperim*” (Hebrew meaning “scribal corrections”). Scholars debate both the frequency and placement of these emendations. See the explanations in Wurthwein, Ernst, *The Text of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 1995) 2d ed. At 17ff.

⁴ We should add that among those passages generally agreed as amended by scribes, the text is altered minimally. See generally, Brotzman, Ellis, *Old Testament Textual Criticism, A Practical Introduction*, (Baker Academic 1994) at 117ff; Hayes, John, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Abingdon 1979) at 55.

values, is simply to disassociate God from the actions. In modern parlance, “He didn’t really do that!”

A further example of re-writing Scripture is found in the non-biblical book of *Jubilees*. This book was written between 161 and 140BC.⁵ This book attempts to retell many stories of the Bible as allegedly told to Moses while he was spending his 40 days on Mount Sinai before God. In *Jubilees*, it is the master demon Mastema who has God test Abraham by asking for the sacrifice of Isaac (Jub. 17:16). This is a clear move away from Scripture’s claim simply that God came to Abraham asking for the sacrifice.

The idea that Scripture could not really mean what Scripture seems to be saying re-percolates in other approaches, as we will shortly see. All of these similar approaches run into many of the same problems, as we will discuss later.

2. A Different God.

One of the first major heresies confronted by the early church came from the teachings of Marcion. Marcion was born in Sinope, Asia Minor somewhere toward the end of the first or beginning of the second century. A wealthy ship owner and merchant, he moved to Rome around 135 A.D. Some early authorities indicate that Marcion’s home church (where his father was Bishop!) had already expelled him for heresy or moral misdeeds. Arriving in Rome, Marcion became a major player in the Roman church donating a large sum of money. The Roman church eventually returned the money and also expelled Marcion for his heretical teachings and ideas.⁶

Marcion taught that the church wrongly used and supported the Old Testament. For Marcion, the God of the Old Testament was clearly different than the God of the New Testament and Jesus. Using Luke 5:36-38 (the parable of the wineskins) and Luke 6:43 (“no good tree bears bad fruit nor does a bad tree bear good fruit”), Marcion argued that Jesus’ message was totally new and apart from Judaism and the Jewish scriptures. Marcion wrote a listing of proofs that the Old Testament God was different from that of the New Testament.⁷ For example, The God of Genesis could not find Adam and Eve, having to call out, “Where are you?” (Gen.

⁵ See the Introduction and Translations by O. S. Wintermute in Charlesworth, James H., ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, (Doubleday 1985) v. 2, at 44.

⁶ Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, reportedly ran into Marcion in Asia Minor (or Rome, depending upon account). As Iranaeus reported the account, Marcion asked Polycarp, “Do you recognize me?” Polycarp responded, “I recognize you for the firstborn of Satan!” Iranaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 3, 3:4.

⁷ This publication was called, *Antithesis*, and is lost. What we know of it today comes mainly from Tertullian’s writings against Marcion from about 200 A.D.

3:9), whereas Jesus knew even the thoughts of man (Luke 5:22). A similar “proof” for Marcion was the God of the Old Testament saying, “an eye for an eye” (Ex. 21:24) where Jesus said, “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also” (Lk 6:29).

Marcion considered the God of the Old Testament as a vengeful and hateful God contrasted to the loving God of the New Testament. Similarly, the Old Testament God was centered on legal minded justice while the New Testament God and father of Jesus was merciful. The Old Testament God worked through his faulty creation; the New Testament God came into that creation to save mankind.

Marcion put together his own set of acceptable scriptures. Marcion’s “Bible” or “canon” consisted of Luke edited to his liking, and ten of Paul’s letters again edited and explained by the peculiarities of Marcion’s beliefs in introductions to the books. Marcion sought to distance the true teachings of Paul and Luke (and thereby of Jesus) from that of the other apostles. Marcion believed that Paul, Jesus, and Luke had supported his belief that the Old Testament god was a vengeful, hateful, harsh, and judgmental god distinct from the God of the New Testament. Similarly, Judaism was a corrupt and wicked faith that promised an earthly Messiah to set up an earthly kingdom. That anticipated event was preempted by the loving God of the New Testament who sent Jesus (not a man, but an apparition!) to destroy the Old Testament and Judaism by revealing it for what it was.

When Marcion put together his scriptures, he used the gospel of Luke, and none of the other three. Even the gospel of Luke required revisions, however, so Marcion left off the first two chapters that linked Jesus to the Old Testament by birth and teaching. Similarly, Marcion left out the temptation narrative in Luke 4:1-3 because Jesus quotes Deuteronomy three times in response to Satan’s temptations. Luke 4:16-30 where Jesus claims to fulfill the Old Testament was also booted from Marcion’s bible. Paul’s writings also suffered editing from the hand of Marcion. Much of Romans 9-11 was removed, as were the critical verses from Romans 3:21-4:25. In Galatians, Paul’s usage of Abraham as an example of faith was excised.⁸

⁸ Marcion taught an ethic that was very impressive. No doubt many converts were won over to his system simply by his lifestyle. Again, there are impressive lifestyle examples found in heresies of orthodoxy today, but that does not change the issues of truth in belief and understanding. Marcion was celibate and required the same of his followers. He taught people that morality was important and urged people to live, denying the pleasures of this world and dedicating themselves to the next world. For more on Marcion and early church heresies see the Church history series under our website at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. The most thorough contemporary work on Marcion is Harnack, Adolf, *Marcion, The Gospel of the Alien God*, (Baker Books 1990).

The effect of Marcion on the church was significant. He spread his heresy far and wide (Tertullian would say he planted churches the way wasps do nests!). Marcionism grew so much that the movement lasted several hundred years. Not a small feat when you consider that it taught celibacy, so growth only occurred through conversion!

Of course, Marcion's solution to the difficult Scriptural portrayals of God are only as reliable as one's willingness to throw away most all of what the church and Judaism has recognized as Holy Writ.

3. A Different Hermeneutic.

Rather than completely rejecting the Old Testament, many scholars, ancient and modern, read portions of the Old Testament as something different than the simple history some of those portions seem to convey. We shall consider both an ancient and a modern use of this approach.

Origen and the Alexandrian School

In Alexandria, Egypt, a tradition of reading the Old Testament allegorically preceded even the Christian writers.⁹ Similar allegorical approaches were a hallmark of the early seminary at Alexandria, home to many noteworthy early church figures including Clement of Alexandria (c.150 - 215) and Origen (c.185 - 250).

Origen worked hard to understand the unity of Scripture and of God as revealed in Scripture. In the face of Marcionism and other heresies in the early church, Origen believed that the one God was revealed in both the Testaments, and a peacemaker was the person who could demonstrate the concord and peace of the Old Testament with the New.¹⁰

Toward that end, Origen believed that there were three possible levels for understanding Scripture. The most basic level was the literal one. Beyond that, however, Origen believed were more profound and useful categories of moral interpretation and of allegorical interpretation. Here was where Origen frequently found his answers to the perplexing problems we discuss today.

We have a set of Origen's sermons on Joshua. Origen understood the message of Joshua not in literal terms, but allegorical ones. The inhabitants of Canaan that were to be destroyed by Israel were symbolic of our sin. When Joshua was instructed to fully and totally annihilate and destroy the local inhabitants, what

⁹ Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria read Old Testament passages allegorically.

¹⁰ Bruce, Barbara, *The Fathers of the Church: Origen, Homilies on Joshua*, (Catholic University Press 2002) at 6-7.

Origen understood the instruction to fully destroy the sin within us, whether that sin was old, or new, fully-grown or infantile. Not just the sin, but also all that went with the sin (livestock, *etc.*). All was to be destroyed and devoted to God.

Within us are the Canaanites; within us are the Perizzites; here are the Jebusites. In what way must we exert ourselves, how vigilant must we be or for how long must we persevere, so that when all these breeds of vices have been forced to flee, “our land may rest from wars” at last?¹¹

Of course, Origen saw this allegory even more convincingly since “Joshua” as a name was the Hebrew version of the Greek name “Jesus.” As Joshua led the people to victory over the Canaanites, Jesus leads the believer to victory over sin.¹²

Seibert and the Historiography Approach

Eric Seibert is a Professor of Old Testament at Messiah College, a private congregation associated with the Brethren church. One hallmark of the Brethren church is its stand for pacifism, even in the face of war.¹³ Seibert grew up with pious convictions in that denomination, and it is not surprising that he found the Old Testament scriptures that show God ordering battle and war very troubling.

Seibert has written a book he uses as a text in teaching classes on this subject entitled, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*.¹⁴ In the book, Seibert takes a 21st century approach to the problem that, like Origen, dismisses much of the literal meaning of the Old Testament passages in question, yet for an entirely different reason. While Origen was always concerned with every word, believing that all Scripture had a role of edifying the reader (even the most minute passage), and hence the Bible was word for word precisely what God intended, Seibert takes a different view.

Seibert does not believe that the texts accurately convey history. Instead, he considers them part of a genre of literature that he and a number of other scholars term “ancient historiography.” After a rather superficial walk through some issues that he believes disproves the historical value of the biblical history books, he then explains the “type” of literature he believes is present:

¹¹ Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, at 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, at 26ff.

¹³ Read more about the Brethren church and the Anabaptist movement from which it developed at the church history lessons on the class website referenced in footnote 8.

¹⁴ Seibert, Eric, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God*, (Fortress 2009).

Assuming that Old Testament narratives were written to preserve a record of what actually happened is a modern—not an ancient—historiographic assumption... Old Testament narrative represents a distinct literary genre that needs to be understood on its own terms.¹⁵

Seibert then offers several distinguishing hallmarks of his idea of “ancient historiography”:

- The “narratives often reveal more about the Author’s timeframe than the stories.”¹⁶ Seibert believes Joshua was written in the late 600’s BC, not in the real time of Joshua.
- “Old Testament narratives were more concerned with literary persuasion than with historical objectivity.”¹⁷ In this sense, Seibert believes the authors “massaged” the facts to make their points, regardless of historical accuracy.
- “Old Testament narratives put words in people’s mouths.”¹⁸ Seibert believes that when someone is said to have spoken something, the speech was not truly spoken. It was just a way of conveying a message important to the story.
- “Old Testament narratives view the world theologically.”¹⁹ For this reason, the authors supposedly supply theological reasons for events regardless of whether the theological reason was valid. So when Scripture says, “God did or said xyz, one should not believe it as history, but merely a way to further a storyline.

Any regular follower of this class will recognize that this is not a view to which I subscribe. While my objections are many, I will list just three, starting with the weakest and working to the strongest concerns:

1. Seibert reminds me of many of my friends who went to graduate school and were taught this approach, but never spent the time trying to examine it on its own merits, opting instead to follow it as the popular notion. Now this is not a valid reason for my rejection of his opinions, but merely an

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, at 105-106.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, at 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, at 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

observation of what might be true.²⁰ Suffice it to say it makes me suspicious and a more careful reader of how he justifies his conclusions.

2. Seibert does a thoroughly inadequate job of arguing that the accounts could not be historical in an accurate sense. A primary example is the two-page treatment of why the Joshua events are impossible according to the “archaeological evidence.” For example, referencing Jericho, Seibert fails to fairly parse through the evidence as we have done in the past three lessons. Instead, Seibert merely quotes Finkelstein and Silberman’s conclusions that Jericho was unoccupied at the time of the invasion of Canaan.²¹
3. Most importantly, this approach by Seibert removes any historical validity from most of the Bible, save perhaps only that authenticated by extra-biblical evidence. Seibert wants the readers to embrace a “Christocentric Hermeneutic” by which he means, believe and understand that God is as revealed by Jesus. The problem here is that many will say that the New Testament narratives are “ancient historiography,” just as Seibert thinks of the Old Testament. At what point does one decide that history truly took place? Seibert tries to get there by urging his students to be “discerning readers,” but in my opinion, he fails to give real objective ways to decide what he believes is real (what Jesus said) versus what he believes was pushing an agenda (the Joshua narratives for example).

In conclusion, the modern scholar Seibert (and others in his school of thought) joins the ancients in trying to disassociate God from the behavior ascribed to him in the Old Testament. These “disassociation approaches” are contrasted to those approaches that seek to accept God’s behavior as set forth in the difficult passages. We turn to those now.

4. God is complex and at times, abusive.

²⁰ A proper examination would begin by identifying multiple extra-biblical examples of this narrative type. This identification should show the types to proceed from the same culture in the same time range for similar reasons. Then taking those examples, study to find the characteristics that both show it to be such “ancient historiography” and show how to make the determination. Seibert does reference Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Yet, most scholars recognize the ancients always understood those works as a fictional storyline (actually they were Greek poems!). This is true even though the *Iliad* used the background of the war with Troy as its basic storyline. Importantly, not even Seibert argues that the poems are cultural equivalents to the Hebrew narrative histories.

²¹ *Ibid.*, at 101-102.

Rabbi David Blumenthal, a professor of Judaic studies at Emory University, authored a book entitled, *Facing the Abusive God: A Theology of Protest*.²² In the book, Blumenthal tries to understand how God could allow such travesties as the holocaust or the sexual abuse of a child. His conclusion is that sometimes God is abusive. Blumenthal writes,

God is abusive, but not always. God, as portrayed in our holy sources and as experienced by humans throughout the ages, acts, from time to time, in a manner that is so unjust that it can only be characterized by the term “abusive.” In this mode, God allows the innocent to suffer greatly. In this mode, God “caused” the holocaust, or allowed it to happen (emphasis in original).²³

Having set this out, Blumenthal then chides God adding,

Abusive behavior is abusive; it is inexcusable, in all circumstances (emphasis in original).²⁴

Not surprisingly, in an earlier chapter where Blumenthal sets out six personal attributes of God, his list includes as number three, “*God is powerful but not perfect.*”²⁵

Blumenthal has no trouble understanding or accepting the Old Testament passages that seem to disturb many in what they might indicate about God. For Blumenthal, they accurately reflect the idea that God is not perfect, has a temper, and sometimes does very abusive and inexcusable things.

This idea certainly runs counter to the idea contained in both the Old and New Testament that God is in fact perfect. We read in Deuteronomy 32:4,

The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

Similarly in 2 Samuel 22:31 (and Psalm 18:30) we read,

This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.

²² Blumenthal, David, *Facing the Abusive God: A Theology of Protest*, (Westminster/John Knox 1993).

²³ *Ibid.* at 246.

²⁴ *Ibid.* at 248.

²⁵ *Ibid.* at 16.

Jesus echoed this same conviction when he urged his disciples to seek perfection as their God and Heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48).

While one sympathizes with those who have endured the worst pains and travails, and while nothing can equal the pain of what transpired in the holocaust, save maybe those children who endure sexual abuse, it does not seem to resolve the issue of these passages in a way that is consistent with other teachings of Scripture. As we dissect the Scriptures and construct answers next week, we will return to Blumenthal and his ready acceptance of God in ways that might seem distasteful to us.

5. God has divine immunity.

In 2003, Zondervan published a book as part of their “Counterpart Series” that featured four different theologians advancing four different views on the issue of “God and Canaanite Genocide.”²⁶ One of the theologians is Professor Daniel Gard who teaches theology at Concordia Theological Seminary. Gard does a good job describing the “Divine Immunity” position:

Nothing evil can be attributed to God because God is in his very essence good... What appears to the human mind as “evil” acts of God are in fact not “evil” acts at all since they come from the Lord himself. There simply comes a point in which human reason must bow to the divine and recognize that his ways are truly not ours and his thoughts are truly above our own (cf. Isa. 55:8-9).²⁷

This view accepts the actions of God but does not seek to judge them or hold them in any negative light. By definition, God’s actions are termed both right and righteous. His actions are simply accepted. A major criticism levied against this approach is that it “discourages certain kinds of questions and restricts honest inquiry about the character of God...[It] leaves little room for vigorous engagement with questions of divine justice and fairness.”²⁸

6. God had just causes for his actions.

Walter Kaiser joined with four other authors in compiling a book entitled, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*.²⁹ In the book, Kaiser addresses the questions of why God

²⁶ Cowles, C. S., et al., *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Zondervan 2003).

²⁷ *Ibid.* at 55.

²⁸ Seibert at 73.

²⁹ Kaiser, Walter, et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, (IVP Academic 1996).

said, “Completely Destroy Them!”³⁰ Kaiser asserts that Scripture provides the reason, at least partially, for God’s actions:

God dedicated these things or persons to destruction because they violently and steadfastly impeded or opposed his work over a long period of time.³¹

Kaiser points out the Genesis 15:13-16 passage where God says he will wait to lead the Israelites from Egypt until “the iniquity of the Amorites” is “complete.” Similarly, Kaiser points to Deuteronomy 9:5,

Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

For Kaiser, the actions of God are consistent with the motive of cutting off a gangrenous limb:

This is not doing evil that good may come; it is removing the cancer that could infect all of society and eventually destroy the remaining good.³²

While the explanations given by Kaiser resonate with other passages of Scripture, his explanation fails to consider (or at least fails to address) the instructed slaughter of infants and young children.

7. God’s actions were for the greater good.

When Jesus was asked why Moses allowed divorce, if indeed divorce was not within God’s intention for marriage, Jesus responded, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce, but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt. 19:8). The concept Jesus conveyed was that God was, in a sense, making the best of a bad situation. Things were not going to be handled in the perfect way God would order, and so God set in place a procedure to minimize the harm from the sin.

In a similar manner, some understand the actions of God in destroying the Canaanites (and others) as something that, while not the best course, was the best course *under the circumstances*. An example of this reasoning is found in the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, at 206-207.

³¹ *Ibid.* at 206.

³² *Ibid.* at 207.

writings of Gleason Archer, professor of Old Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Gleason writes that:

The baneful infection of degenerate idolatry and moral depravity had to be removed before Israel could safely settle down in these regions and set up a monotheistic, law-governed commonwealth as a testimony for the one true God. Much as we regret the terrible loss of life, we must remember that far greater mischief would have resulted if they had been permitted to live on in the midst of the Hebrew nation.³³

In other words, as bad as it was, it could have been worse! Gleason's analysis has some scriptural support from passages like Deuteronomy 20:16-18,

But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction...that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.

The difficulty in Archer's approach, like the "just cause" approach of Kaiser, is that it fails to address the order to kill infants. Are we to believe that the one-week old infant growing up in a monotheistic Israel would lead the Israelites astray after idols?

Terrence Fretheim, an Old Testament Professor at Luther Seminary, takes a similar approach but with a different "greater good." Fretheim argues that even in violence, God is seeking to accomplish loving purposes. Writing in part in response to the violence of 9/11, and the assertion by perpetrators that God religiously justified it as a holy war, Fretheim distinguished God's actions of war and killing in the Old Testament:

God's *uses* of violence—and that phrasing is important—are associated with two basic purposes: judgment and salvation...God's use of violence, inevitable in a violent world, is intended to subvert human violence in order to bring creation along to a point where violence is no more.³⁴

So, Fretheim argues that God uses violence to push the world closer to no violence—paying an ugly price today to eliminate ugliness tomorrow.

³³ Archer, Gleason, *An Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, (Zondervan 1982) at 158.

³⁴ Fretheim, Terrence, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," *Word & World*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter 2004) at 22-25.

Seibert challenges Fretheim's approach as one that allows the ends to justify the means.³⁵ God can do something wrong, he asserts, in order to accomplish something right. This is not a totally fair critique, however, for the argument of Fretheim is that something wrong will be done either way. God's actions are to prevent the greater wrong, not to use a wrong to make a right.

8. God's actions are a part of his progressive revelation.

Progressive revelation refers to the idea that over time, God revealed more and more of his nature and purposes as the cultures and understandings of people were able to process the fuller revelation. In Christ, this doctrine teaches, the revelation of God is made complete. ("Whoever has seen me [Jesus] has seen the Father" – Jn. 14:9).

Tremper Longman, Old Testament Professor at Westmont College, wrote one of the four views in the Zondervan Counterpoints series discussed earlier. In his chapter, Longman sets out what might be fairly construed as "progressive revelation applied to divine warfare." Longman writes of "five phases of holy war in the Bible":

Phase 1: God Fights the Flesh-and-Blood Enemies of Israel.³⁶

This was the type of military battle described in Joshua.

Phase 2: God Fights Israel.³⁷

Longman explains that as Israel learned to live under covenant with God, they learned that failure to abide within that covenant brought judgment upon them, just as they had been God's tools to bring judgment upon other nations and peoples. An example from Joshua is given in the defeat of Israel at the hands of Ai after Israel failed to fully obey God in dedicating all treasure from Jericho to the LORD (Josh. 7).

Phase 3: God Will Come in the Future as Warrior.³⁸

This is seen as the note on which the Old Testament ends—God will not allow his people to be eternally in bondage. "One day God will come again and free them from their oppression."³⁹

³⁵ Seibert at 80.

³⁶ Cowles at 174-175.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.* at 178.

Phase 4: Jesus Christ Fights the Spiritual Powers and Authorities.⁴⁰

As Jesus arrives, the revelation progresses and the war is no longer fought on a flesh-and-blood level. It is a war against powers and forces that are met without conventional weapons. Jesus gives sight to the blind, heals the lame, cures the leprosy, gives hearing to the deaf, raises the dead, and preaches good news to the poor (Mt. 11:4-6). The violence of phase four comes in the opposite manner than one might expect. God does not wage war with physical violence on others. Rather, others use physical violence on God, which is then received as a military victory over the dark powers and forces!

The crucifixion of Jesus indicates a transition away from old physical war against the enemies of God in favor of a higher victory—a spiritual victory. So, Jesus teaches people to win by losing, that the first will be last and the last first (Mt. 20:15-17). He tells Peter to put up his sword knowing he could call legions of angels should he choose a physical fight (Mt 26:52-54).

Paul takes this concept and gives it further explanations in Ephesians 6:12-18,

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times.

This places the later ideas of the New Testament not as a contrary revelation of God, but a further more progressive revelation.

Phase 5: The Final Battle.⁴¹

The state of things after the sacrifice of Christ is not the final stage of revelation of God as warrior. The book of Revelation teaches in very vivid language that Christ will come back as holy warrior and will finally right all wrongs, leading into the next age when the beast and false prophet are thrown into the fiery lake of burning

³⁹ *Ibid.* at 179.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.* at 182.

sulfur while their army is killed with the sword proceeding from the mouth of Christ (Rev. 19:11-21). While the exact meaning of this vision is yet to be seen and understood, we do note that the New Testament teaches that the current state of battle between right and wrong, will one day find its culmination in right winning and wrong being destroyed.

The progressive revelation view sort of begs the question of why an all powerful God acts in an apparently immoral way. It seems to explain *what* he is doing, but not *why*.

CONCLUSION

These viewpoints are some of those expressed by authors and theologians, both ancient and modern. These arguments are not the only ones, and others espouse these arguments differently. However, they serve to give a flavor of what others assess when reading these difficult texts and as such, give background ideas and pitfalls in our construction towards a solution next week.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him”* (James 1:5).

There is certainly a difference between wisdom, knowledge, and intelligence. Knowledge is data; intelligence is an ability to use and manipulate data. Wisdom is much more. Wisdom involves seeing matters from a divine perspective. Wisdom moves one closer to understanding the heart and mind of God. The famous chapter on wisdom (Proverbs 8) explains that wisdom was possessed by the Lord at the beginning of his work, before even creation (Prov. 8:22-26).

As we work through these passages, make a commitment over the next week to ask God for wisdom daily. Seek his help in understanding Scripture in its revelation of him and his work through history. He will honor those who seek wisdom.

2. *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed”* (Gen. 9:6).

As we read and consider the death of humans, even as ordered by God, something rises up within us questioning whether such could be right. There is a loud voice inside all of us that shouts out the value of another human. There is a difference in humanity from other beings or objects. Something makes it wrong to kill a human. Deep within we have a recognition of the specialness of humans who, Scripture teaches, are made in the “image of God” (Gen. 1:26-27). This is why it is wrong to kill

another, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, *for God made man in his own image*” (Gen. 9:6).

Set aside the issue of death for a moment and let us examine how we are treating other humans made in the image of God. The Old Testament prophets were as upset over the mistreatment of the poor as over other sin. In this season, take the time to sit with your family (or by yourself) and decide a way(s) to help someone who is less privileged than you.

3. “*Take up the whole armor of God*” (Eph. 6:11).

Regardless of how we view these difficult Old Testament passages, we can certainly agree that we all struggle internally to do right, to be righteous, and to live in victory over sin and temptation. Paul is right; this is not an achievable end on our own. This is where we must have help from God. Make the decision to seek his help, not to succumb to simply “being that way,” but to strive through his grace and strength to grow before him.

WANT MORE?

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