

The Character of God

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“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”

This is a quote from Richard Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion*. When I came across the quote, it got me wondering about Dawkins’ characterisation of God. From a superficial reading of the Old Testament, his observations appear to have some merit. There is the incident, for example, where God asks the Israelites to kill all the Midianite men, woman, and boys – and to keep the girls who had not slept with a man, *as spoils of war*.¹

Today, there would be a *huge* international outcry if these actions were enacted by one country on another.

Unfortunately, this is not the only act of violence in the Old Testament. It is repeated in the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan. God also commands acts of violence against His own people, such as when Moses came down from Mount Sinai and the Israelites had fallen into idolatry. Moses told the Levites that God had commanded them to go through the Israelite camp and kill their brother, friend, and neighbour.²

Many of God’s commandments are rather violent. We read about the stoning of people who have committed certain sinful acts. There is the *eye for an eye* principle. If a man beats his slave and the slave does not die, the owner is not to be punished since the slave is his property. There are many other such examples.

¹ Numbers 31:1-18

² Exodus 32:27-28

For me, this is *not* the character of God that He revealed to us through His Beloved Son. But how do I *dismiss* God's characterisation in the Old Testament when we are told in Timothy that the Bible is divinely inspired?³ I am also not sure *what* relationship I should have with a god who is a 'bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser' and 'genocidal' god, or even if I *want* to have a relationship with him. This dichotomy – between the character of God as revealed in the Old Testament and the character of God as revealed through His Son – has created a cognitive dissonance, which has been gnawing at me for a long time.

So *how* do I reconcile this issue? *Can* I reconcile this issue?

The Character of Jesus

Is it possible that Jesus only reflected *one part* of God's character and not all of it – not revealing those parts of God's character which appear to be violent, genocidal, and unjust? We are told in Hebrews,

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also He made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being. (Heb 1:1-3a)

Or, as the New Living Translation puts it, *Jesus is the very character of God*. If Jesus is the *exact representation* of God, or the *very character* of God, it is difficult to think that he only reflected a *part* of God's character. Also, Jesus himself says,

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had really known me, you would know who my Father is. From now on, you do know him and have seen him! (Jn 14:6-7)

Again, Jesus is re-iterating that he is the *very character* of God. If we have seen Jesus, we have seen God. What is more, the word 'truth' there is the Greek word '*alethia*' which means unconcealed, revealed, or literally 'the state of not being hidden.' Jesus is telling us that he is the revealed or *unconcealed* character of God – which could imply that the character of God was not fully revealed through the Old Testament prophets.

³ 2Timothy 3:16-17

Paul adds to this in Colossians where he says that *in Christ* lie hidden *all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and that *in Christ* lives the fullness of God in a human body.⁴ So not only do we see the fullness of God *in Jesus*, but in Jesus all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge *can be found*.

I think it can be safe to say from these verses that Christ revealed the *whole* character of God, that in Christ we can find *all* knowledge and wisdom.

If Jesus reflected the *whole* character of God, what did Jesus have to say about enemies, killing, and violence in general?

In Matthew, he says, *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy (Matt 5:7)*, and *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (Matt 5:9)* And when referencing the Old Testament Law, Jesus says:

You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow. You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbour' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! (Mt 5:38-44)

In Luke, we are told of the occasion when the Samaritans did not welcome Jesus while he was on the way to Jerusalem.⁵ Two of his disciples – James and John – recommended to Jesus that they call down fire from heaven to burn up the Samaritans. James and John knew their scriptures well, and they knew that Elisha had done this to two groups of fifty soldiers. So what they were suggesting was not without precedent. However, Jesus *rebuked* the two disciples. In fact, the Greek word for rebuke can also be translated 'to censure severely.' Jesus was *clearly not happy* with his disciples' suggestion, even though they thought they had scriptural precedence for it.

It is without a doubt that Jesus preached peace – to love our enemies, to show mercy – and that this same message is preached throughout the Gospels.

⁴ Colossians 2:3

⁵ Luke 9:51-55

This, however, creates a dilemma. If the *whole* character of God is shown in Christ, how do I deal with the portraits of God in the Old Testament which are *not* revealed in Christ? I cannot dismiss them, as the whole of scripture is inspired by God. And God could not have changed, as we are told in scripture that God does not change.⁶

This raises several questions. Is *some* or *all* of scripture not inspired? Is Jesus *not* what the New Testament makes him out to be? Is the Bible just a history book describing the exploits of nations and individuals?

I don't want to believe in the god of Dawkins, as I have felt the loving and gracious hand of God in my life many times. I know the joy of answered prayer. And in God's graciousness, He has softened the consequences of my own sins. And I *yearn* to be as Jesus was and is. So, there must be another answer to this dilemma.

Searching for Answers

In searching for an answer, I decided to start with a literature review of the topic. I excluded all the explanations which state that it is God's right to judge the world and use violence as part of His divine judgment, as these do not match the character of Jesus shown throughout the Gospels. All the other arguments to justify the apparent violent nature of God could be broken down into three broad categories:

1. The first is that, as the Bible was written by humans, their writings were fashioned after their own cultural beliefs.
2. The second is that these stories were written down long after their time to inspire others to courage and absolute commitment to God.
3. The third is that the extreme language in the biblical texts – such as 'kill every living thing' – is not intended literally, but is merely hyperbole to describe definitive victory.

Cultural Accommodations

There is some archaeological evidence to support the idea that the biblical texts reflect the writers' cultural beliefs and that some of the texts may have been hyperbole to describe conclusive victories.

⁶ Malachi 3:6

However, these explanations do not *adequately* address the issue of God’s apparent violent nature in the Old Testament. My research into the cultural beliefs of the ancient Near East drew me to the passage in Matthew where Jesus says,

Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts, but it was not what God had originally intended. (Mt 18: 8)

By implication, Moses allowed divorce to take place because of the hardness of the people’s hearts, even though this was never the intention of God, who hates divorce.⁷

We are also told that marriage is a metaphor of the relationship between Christ and the church.⁸ Within this metaphor, there is clearly no place for polygamy and divorce. However, the Old Testament law permitted both divorce and polygamy. And God seems to concede to both, even though this was never His intention from the beginning. God has allowed an adjustment of His principles in order to cater for the culture of the time – where multiple wives and divorce were both common cultural elements in the ancient Near East.

Another concession that God appears to have made (to cater for the culture of the day) was animal sacrifices. I can find at least ten references in the Old Testament that clearly state that God does not want sacrifices.⁹ What He *does* want is for His people to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with Him. Twice when arguing with the Pharisees, Jesus tells them to learn what this means: *“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”*¹⁰ Nothing could be clearer than Christ *himself* saying that God did not want animal sacrifices:

Christ said, “You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings or burnt offerings or other offerings for sin, nor were you pleased with them” (though they are required by the law of Moses). (Heb 10:8)

Again, it appears that it was never God’s intention to have animals sacrificed to Him. But in order to cater for the culture of the time – where people offered sacrifices to please their gods –

⁷ Malachi 2:16

⁸ Ephesians 5:31

⁹ 1Samuel 15:22; Hosea 6:6; Psalm 51:16-17; Proverbs 21:3; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8; Jeremiah 7:22-23; Psalm 40:6-8; Isaiah 1:11-17; Ecclesiastes 5:1; Psalm 50:8-9

¹⁰ Matthew 9:13; Matthew 12:7

God made a concession. He replaced the idols with Himself but kept the sacrifices, since this is what the people knew at that time.

And another concession God makes to cater for the culture of the ancient Far East is the provision of a human king to rule over His people. God initially sets up His people with *Him* as their King and with the judges to manage their day-to-day affairs. But this was not good enough for the people, and so they asked for a human king so that they could be like all the other nations.¹¹ Even though God's own people were rejecting Him, God provides them with a king and even *works* with the human kings who ruled over His people.

Further accommodations can be found in the Law of Moses. The Code of Hammurabi – which was published hundreds of years before the Law of Moses – has many similarities to the Law of Moses. Moses did not copy the Code of Hammurabi, but rather, when God provided the inspired word to Moses, He accommodated the culture of the times. He allowed certain laws and regulations – ones which the Israelites would have been familiar with – to be part of His law.

These cultural accommodations explain the Old Testament references to monsters such as Leviathan and Behemoth. They also explains why many of the depictions of God in the Old Testament have clear parallels with other ancient Near Eastern warrior deities.¹² These cultural accommodations can even explain why it appears as though God commands the Israelites to genocide.

In several places in the Old Testament, God *clearly* indicates how He would like Israel to deal with their enemies and how they should go about occupying the promised land. He does not command violence. In Hosea we are told,

“But I will show love to the people of Judah. I will free them from their enemies – not with weapons and armies or horses and charioteers, but by my power as the LORD their God.”
(Hos 1:7)

We are told that Elisha dispatches the Aramaean army without anyone being killed. In fact, the King of Israel gives them a great feast before sending them home.¹³ In Leviticus we are told that

¹¹ 1Samuel 8:5

¹² Psalm 18

¹³ 2Kings 6

it is God who will drive the Canaanites out of the land and that the land itself will “vomit them out.”¹⁴ And a long while before the Israelites violently invaded the promised land, God said:

I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive out the Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites. But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals would multiply and threaten you. I will drive them out a little at a time until your population has increased enough to take possession of the land. (Ex 23:28-30)

God’s *original* intention was for the Israelites to deal with their enemies *peacefully* and to slowly move the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan off the land so that the Israelites could eventually, peacefully occupy the land. Without having to commit genocide.

But this did not happen. *Why?*

In the ancient Near East, the culture was to acquire land through violence and genocide, with the help of your warrior deity. The culturally-conditioned, hard-of-heart Israelites could not conceive of acquiring land peacefully. It is likely they did not have sufficient faith in their father. They did not trust their father to deliver the land to them, without them having to draw their own swords. So they drew their swords.

It appears what God said to Moses was that He would give the Israelites the land and He (*God*) would remove the people from it. What Moses’ culturally-conditioned heart heard was, “Go and violently attack the inhabitants of the land.”

When God Withdraws His Protection

We also need to look at some of the incidents where it appears that God acts violently – the most obvious one being the crucifixion of His Son Jesus. Even a cursory reading of the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus makes it clear that the violence against the Son of God was perpetrated by *mankind* and not God. What God did do was *to not stop* the evil and violence in men’s hearts, which resulted in them killing His Son. God did this by removing His protective power over His Son, which is possibly why Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”¹⁵

¹⁴ Leviticus 18:24-25

¹⁵ Matthew 27:46

This raises an interesting possibility. On the mount of Olives, just before Jesus' arrest, he asks his Father if He would take "this cup" away from him. This cup is often considered to be the cup of God's wrath or fury, based on the Old Testament usage of the metaphorical cup. By implication then, when God refers to the cup of fury or cup of wrath in the Old Testament, what it really means is that He is going to remove His protective power over the respective people or nations, letting the natural consequences of their sin become their punishment.

This concept of sin bringing its own punishment is confirmed by God, where He says:

"Your wickedness will bring its own punishment." (Jer 2:19)

The punishments which the nation of Israel faced were not inflicted by God but were a consequence of the nation's own sin. God *removed* His protective power over them so that they could feel the results of their wickedness and be taught a lesson. A good example is found in Chronicles. The nation of Israel had abandoned God. God, through the prophet Shemaiah, says,

This is what the LORD says: You have abandoned me, so I am abandoning you to Shishak. (2Chr 12:5)

This is not God actively attacking the nation of Israel, but rather it is exactly what the text says, merely His abandonment of the nation. What comes next in the text is equally instructive:

Then the leaders of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, "The LORD is right in doing this to us!" When the LORD saw their change of heart, He gave this message to Shemaiah: "Since the people have humbled themselves, I will not completely destroy them and will soon give them some relief. I will not use Shishak to pour out my anger on Jerusalem." (2Chr 12:6-7)

Here scripture calls God's abandonment – or removal of His protective power over Israel – the pouring out of His anger.

In Deuteronomy, scripture equates God's anger to Him abandoning the nation of Israel:

The LORD said to Moses, "You are about to die and join your ancestors. After you are gone, these people will begin to worship foreign gods, the gods of the land where they are going. They will abandon me and break my covenant that I have made with them. Then my anger will blaze forth against them. I will abandon them, hiding my face from them, and they will be devoured. Terrible trouble will come down on them, and on that day they will say, 'These disasters have come down on us because God is no longer among us!'" (Dt 31:16-17)

This passage also equates Israel's punishment with God hiding his face from them, removing his protective power. The consequences of the nation's sin will be their punishment, not God explicitly lashing out acts of violence against them.

Even though the Old Testament text sometimes appears to read like God is unleashing his wrath with violence, these texts are more likely to reflect the culture of the ancient Near East. At the time, it was generally assumed that deities unleashed violent acts against those with whom the deities were displeased. Psalm 7 shows both the ancient Far East culture narrative of a warrior deity, but also shows that the punishments are a *natural* consequence of sin and not God's flaming arrows.

*If a person does not repent,
God will sharpen his sword;
he will bend and string his bow.
He will prepare his deadly weapons
and shoot his flaming arrows.
The wicked conceive evil;
they are pregnant with trouble
and give birth to lies.
They dig a deep pit to trap others,
then fall into it themselves.
The trouble they make for others backfires on them.
The violence they plan falls on their own heads. (Ps 7:12-16)*

God's wrath in these verses is equated to the natural consequences of a person's sin. This is not *God inflicting* punishment on the people. This is God *not using his protective power* to spare them from the natural outworking of their own sin.

Generally, whenever we read violent depictions of God in the Old Testament, we will also find, in proximity, passages which state that God will "remove His presence" or "hide His face", or some other imagery indicating that God will remove or has removed His protective power. In addition, we will find, in proximity, passages describing who or which nation is going to inflict the punishment on the people.

Why would God *remove* his protective presence from people He *loves*? The reason is found in Hebrews:

And have you forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you as His children? He said, “My child, don’t make light of the LORD’s discipline, and don’t give up when He corrects you. For the LORD disciplines those He loves, and He punishes each one He accepts as His child.” As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as His own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? (Heb 12:5-7)

The discipline spoken of here is God *allowing* the results of our *own* sins to be felt so that a lesson could be learnt – just like a parent might – in love – not constantly covering for their own children’s misdeeds so that the child could learn a lesson. And just as a parent would not take any pleasure in seeing their children suffer as a natural consequence of their own misdeeds, I believe God takes no pleasure in seeing His children suffer as a result of their own sins. God our Father loves us and wants us to become the best versions of ourselves possible. Sometimes that takes us having to experience the pain of our own sins and poor decisions.

Natural Disasters

The last issue we will look at is the appearance of God inflicting violence through natural events, such as floods, earthquakes, plagues and the like. I noticed an interesting thing when looking at these incidents in scripture: it does not appear as though it is *God perpetrating* these violent acts through natural events.

In the incident with Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the Israelites who grumbled against Moses and Aaron,¹⁶ Paul says the destroyer or *destroying angel* acted against them.¹⁷ This is the same word used by the Septuagint translators for the angel that killed the firstborn in Egypt. In both cases, the biblical authors are not giving *specific* attribution to God for these acts.

It could very easily be argued that the angels were merely acting on God’s instructions. However, I wonder if there is something else going on here. Perhaps this destroying angel is not an angelic being, but a representation of a *natural* event which results in the death of people.

¹⁶ Numbers 16

¹⁷ 1Corinthians 10:10

It is possible that these acts of nature such as earthquakes, floods, plagues, whatever happened to Sodom and Gomorrah, even the great flood – all of which *appear* to be acts of violence perpetrated by God – are natural events that would have occurred *anyway*. God has again merely removed His protective presence from the people.

What we also see in these events is God extending his protective presence to those he loves. For so many people – Noah, the first-born Israelites in Egypt, Moses, Aaron, and the faithful Israelites in the wilderness – God wrapped His loving arms around them to protect them from these natural events.

Wrestling with Contradictions

In conclusion, I think God made cultural accommodations for his people which are reflected in the Old Testament. These accommodations were both in how his people acted and how they saw and spoke about their God. We should not be surprised by this as we all accept the cultural accommodations *Jesus* made in respect of demons in the New Testament.

These accommodations were made by God the Father and by Jesus his Son, as the people were not ready to accept the truth. Their hearts were hard. *Forcing* the truth on the people would have resulted in God *losing* them. Because of God's *love*, He embarked on a long, slow journey to reveal His true nature to a stubborn and rebellious people. And through that, sometimes allowed them to bear the full consequences of their sin.

I hope this discussion has been thought-provoking.

The arguments may not be able to explain *every* appearance of violence by God in scripture, but if we hold to the view that Jesus is the very character of God, that he showed us a way of love, peace, and reconciliation, then there must be an explanation for the apparent contradiction between the Old Testament and New Testament God. We just need to find it.