

Is God a Bully?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

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Joshua 8:1-2, 18, 21-26 (NRSV)

Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Do not fear or be dismayed; take all the fighting men with you, and go up now to Ai. See, I have handed over to you the king of Ai with his people, his city, and his land.² You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king; only its spoil and its livestock you may take as booty for yourselves. Set an ambush against the city, behind it.”

¹⁸ Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Stretch out the sword that is in your hand toward Ai; for I will give it into your hand.” And Joshua stretched out the sword that was in his hand toward the city. . . .²¹ When Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that the smoke of the city was rising, then they turned back and struck down the men of Ai.²² And the others came out from the city against them; so they were surrounded by Israelites, some on one side, and some on the other; and Israel struck them down until no one was left who survived or escaped.²³ But the king of Ai was taken alive and brought to Joshua.

²⁴ When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and when all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai, and attacked it with the edge of the sword.²⁵ The total of those who fell that day, both men and women, was twelve thousand—all the people of Ai.²⁶ For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the sword, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai.

Matthew 5:38-45 (NRSV)

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

John 1:29 (NRSV)

²⁹ The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

1 John 4:9 (NRSV)

⁹ God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

The Old Testament seems to reveal a violent, wrathful God who decrees even genocide. How could this possibly be the same God revealed in Jesus? What is the Bible really saying to us about who God is? Could God really be a bully?

Given the topic for this week, I wanted to find one over-the-top bloodthirsty passage from the Old Testament. It was too easy an assignment. I chose the massacre of Ai – all 12,000 men, women, and, presumably children. Granted Ai was a mortal enemy and Canaan was to be the land for the Israelites, but this story follows fast on the heels of the story of Jericho. There, not only did the walls come a’ tumblin’ down, but every man, woman, and child was put to death but Joshua and the Israelite army (Joshua 6:21). All of it seemingly sanctioned by God. As Robert Coote writes in his commentary on the book of Joshua, “There is probably nothing in the Bible more offensive to modern sensibilities than God’s sanction of genocide against the Canaanites.”¹

We shouldn’t kid ourselves about how big a hurdle such Bible stories pose to believers and non-believers alike. The prominent neo-Atheist, Richard Dawkins, recently wrote, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous

¹In the *New Interpreter’s Bible* series. The 12-volume set is in the St. Andrew library.

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.”²

Granted, it’s the usual Dawkins stick-in-the-eye grotesque and offensive overstatement, but there is a small element of truth to it.

We can be forgiven for asking, “Who is this God we meet in the Old Testament? Where is the love? Where is the God who is revealed in Jesus?”

Marcion

In the middle of the second century, little more than a century after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Marcion, a ship owner from Asia Minor, came to Rome and asked those very questions. His answer was to begin teaching a surprising brand of the Christian message. He believed that there was a total discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, between the God of the OT and Jesus, the God of the NT. Marcion wanted to get rid of the OT entirely, believing that the god depicted in it was a lesser god and unworthy of Christian worship. Obviously, since the Hebrew Scriptures are part of every Bible, Marcion’s ideas were rejected. He was even excommunicated. But the problem lingers still. How could God sanction, even order, such genocidal warfare? Must Sodom and Gomorrah really have been completely and utterly destroyed? Who is this God whose law seems to be an eye for an eye rather than turn the other cheek?

There are many facets to these questions. Here’s a couple of thoughts that we don’t have the space to pursue in this study:

- We need to remember that the ancient world was a harsh and violent place. Life was cheap. Slavery was common. I only half-jokingly ask my students to imagine living in the world of Conan the Barbarian. God has to deal with us as we are, not as we wish we were.
- In the ancient world, the kings were also the supreme warriors and commanders. Thus, we should expect that because the God of Israel was also to be their king, it is God who fills the role of warrior and commander. YHWH commands the armies that conquer Canaan; so long as the people follow YHWH’s battle plans, they succeed. This imagery carries over to the NT as well. In Revelation, for example, Jesus is the divine warrior on the white horse, commanding the angel armies. It surprises people to learn that the “Lord of Hosts” is a military title; hosts is a term for armies.
- There are countless examples in the Old Testament of God’s love and mercy. Two of my favorites are Hosea 2:13-15 and Micah 6:6-8, both written hundreds of years before Jesus.

In the space remaining, I’d like to consider Scripture’s developing revelation of the nature of God.

Progressive Revelation

When you first meet someone, do you know all there is to know about them? Of course not. You will come to know them over time, often a long time, and only to the extent that they open up and reveal themselves to you. We should count ourselves blessed if there is one person to whom we can reveal ourselves completely.

So it is with God. When Abraham first meets God, he learns something of who God is. But he doesn’t even know God’s name. God makes promises to Abraham, but he doesn’t live to see those promises kept. Is God really as good at keeping promises as he is at making them?

Indeed, God isn’t fully revealed until the coming of Jesus. The incarnation and Jesus’ subsequent faithfulness to God and to the covenant reveals to us that God is truly the great

²From Dawkins’ recent book, *The God Delusion*.

promise-keeper.³ Likewise, before Jesus, none of God's people knew that God was inherently relational, the unity of one God comprised of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Abraham and Moses and Elijah would never have imagined such a thing. Neither would we . . . without Jesus. It is Jesus who reveals to us that God not only loves but *is* love in God's very being.

Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that some aspects of God are revealed slowly in Scripture over time. It isn't that God is growing or changing; it is just that he is letting his people know more and more about him as they live with God over the centuries.

You might ask why God waits to reveal himself fully. Well, I think it is because God has to deal with us as we are. Here's an example of what I mean. In the Bible there is a developing revelation of forgiveness. I think you'll see the progression.

1. In Genesis 4:23-24, Lamech tells his wives that he will kill a young man for striking him. Lamech says he will be avenged seventy-seven times! Talk about unlimited vengeance. It is the world of Conan: you've killed my child and now we are going to kill every man, woman, and child in your village.
2. In such a world, the "eye for an eye" of Exodus 21:23-25 is at least proportional vengeance. It sounds so harsh to our ears, but it is real moral progress over the seventy-seven-fold vengeance of Lamech.
3. Indeed, Leviticus 19:18 (still in the Law of Moses) says "you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people." And in Deuteronomy, 32:35, God says "Vengeance is mine." Much the same is repeated in Proverbs 20:22. Vengeance is still in the picture, but it is to be handed over to God.
4. And, finally, God's desires for us are fully revealed by Jesus. In Matthew 5:38, Jesus takes the law from "an eye for an eye" to turning the other cheek and going the second mile. And when Peter asks Jesus show many times he should forgive, Jesus tells him seventy-seven times,⁴ the perfect reversal of Lamech's desire for vengeance (Matthew 18:21-22).

It comes down to this, as it does in all things theological: Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God. When we see Jesus, we see God. When Jesus teaches, it is God teaching.

There are different ways of coming at the questions of God's depiction in the Old Testament. Perhaps, in the light of Christ, we are supposed to understand that the Hebrew writers ascribe actions to God that aren't really God's. Perhaps when Moses announces that God has instructed him to roar through the Israelite camp slaughtering thousands, it is Moses' anger on display, not God's.

But perhaps not. Perhaps we are supposed to understand that in that time and in that place God merely did what had to be done to preserve and protect a people, so that all the families of the earth could be blessed through them.

Perhaps . . . perhaps . . . there is no end to the perhaps. The Bible always has and always will pose enormous interpretive challenges. The bumper sticker "The Bible says it; I believe it" just isn't helpful. What does the Bible really say? What does God intend for us to hear?

But through it all, we know this. God is no bully. God is not vindictive. God is not unjust or unforgiving. God is neither capricious nor megalomaniacal. How do we know this? Because we know Jesus. The one in the "form of God" who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." The one who "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

³Katherine Grieb's excellent study of Romans makes this point well. Her title is *The Story of Romans: a narrative defense of God's righteousness*. We don't normally think of God needing a defense, but in Jesus' day, many Jews wondered if God's promises would ever be fully kept. In his letter to the Romans, Paul makes the case that the very coming of Jesus and his faithfulness all the way to the cross demonstrates that God keeps the promises God makes.

⁴In the Greek this can also be translated "seventy times seven," trumping Lamech's vengeance tenfold.

Interpreting the Old Testament

How do we become better readers and interpreters of the Old Testament? A prominent Old Testament scholar, Tremper Longman III, offers the following tips. You might even cut this out and stick it in the back of your Bible. It will help.

- Discover the author's intending meaning
 - Before we can determine the meaning of a passage for our lives, we have to determine what it meant for the author and original readers. It can't mean for us what it never meant for them!
 - God⇒human author⇒Biblical text⇒first readers⇒present day readers
 - Embrace the mystery in the relationship between divine and human authorship – don't diminish either!
 - Rely on the 2000 year-old Christian community to help you.
- Read scripture in its context
 - Resist the temptation to grab scriptural nuggets.
 - Read the bible as stories, poems, oracles and always look for the bigger story.
- Identify the genre of the book and passage (a genre is a type of literature, e.g., prose and poetry)
 - The genre of individual books – let poetry be poetry! Don't read Job as history!
 - The genre of individual passages – some books mix genres within them – e.g. history and prophetic oracles.
- Consider the historical and cultural background of the Bible
 - Every verse in the Bible is culturally conditioned, just as is every person!
- Consider the grammar and structure within the passage
 - Using several translations will help. Always remember that much of the richness in the original Hebrew (puns and other wordplays for example) resist translation into English. Study notes can help.
- Interpret experience in the light of Scripture and Scripture in the light of experience.
- Always seek the full counsel of scripture.
 - The key parts of the Bible's big story are told over and over. Let clearer passages help you interpret more obscure passages.
- Discover how the passage presents Jesus.
 - We read the Old Testament as Christians, not as anthropologists interested in ancient cultures. We can use the tools of anthropology in our study, but we always approach the Old Testament from within a Christian worldview.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Edlen Cowley has written some discussion questions for St. Andrew's Fellowship Groups. They are helpful in considering personal questions that arise around this topic.

1. Have you ever felt like God has "bullied" you in life?
2. In hindsight, do you see those perceived "bullying" experiences as God literally "bullying" you or do you see them as God stretching and growing you through challenging experiences to your life and faith?
3. There is a saying, "...without a test, we would not have a testimony." If you had not experienced the challenges you've had in your life, how do you think your life would be different? Is it possible to say that you're thankful for your struggles?
4. Romans 8:28 (NRSV) reads, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." How have your struggles shaped you and helped form your faith? Have they "worked together" for your good?
5. In the story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1-44, we are told in vs. 35 that "Jesus wept". How have you experienced Jesus "weeping" with you; i.e. being present with you in challenging times of your life?
6. How have the answers to the previous four questions impacted your answer to the main question, "Is God a bully?"

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Joshua 5:13-6:27 The story of Jericho</p>	<p>Tuesday, Hosea 2 How will God deal with his adulterous Baal-worshiping people?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Deuteronomy 32:35, Proverbs 20:22, Romans 12:14-21 God says leave the vengeance to him.</p>	<p>Thursday, Matthew 5:38-48 Jesus gets to the very heart of the Law.</p>
<p>Friday, Revelation 19:11-21 Jesus the Divine Warrior</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

