

# Did God really say that?

## The God of the Old Testament verses the God of the New Testament

©Rev Dr David J Cohen

### Introduction

In thinking about the God of the Old Testament verses the God of the New Testament, most clearly expressed in the person of Jesus Christ, I'd like first to set down some parameters for our thinking. For those within the Evangelical tradition particularly the Bible has held an authoritative pride of place within the church for some four centuries. Sounds impressive and looks impressive (esp. for those of us who still carry a hardcopy to worship) but becomes notoriously problematic when we actually begin to read it! It seems that some of the images of God presented in the pages of the Old Testament are, on first glance, starkly opposed to the many images of God in the New Testament. This perceived contrast is especially the case when considering the example of Jesus, as portrayed in the gospels and reflected on in the rest of the New Testament.

Of course a simple answer to the perceived problem would be to excise the Old Testament from our bibles just like Marcion tried to do in the second century. Some modern day publishers have helped us out in this regard by producing New Testaments without Old Testaments. Even where we possess bibles that have Old and New Testaments together the 'old' part is largely ignored in liturgy and preaching within the church apart from selections from Psalms and the Prophets which 'fit' with our view of the New Testament and the world in which we live. If the Old Testament can be ignored like this then we can safely say that we have less to read, less to study and I won't have a job!

But! There are a couple of catches here before we start throwing out our complete bibles, buy New Testaments only and be content that to read the New Testament in a year will require us to read *less than* a chapter a day. So, what are the catches? First of all the New Testament has high regard for the Old Testament. Paul says to Timothy that:

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16 NRSV)

So, whatever we think of the images of God presented in the Old Testament apparently we can't simply ignore it or excise it. At this time in history Paul and Timothy only had the Hebrew bible (what we call the Old Testament) and apparently it was imperative for a life of following Jesus. Second, it comes as a surprise to many Christians that approximately one quarter of the New Testament *is actually* the Old Testament. This suggests that to understand what the Old Testament is doing in the New Testament it would be helpful to understand its original context. Based on these two important points it could be argued that the Old Testament ought not to be thought of as 'old', as in obsolete, but is better thought of as the First Testament with the New Testament as the Second Testament. Like two acts in a play. If you come in during Act II you will understand some of the storyline but it probably won't be as clear as it would be by understanding Act I.

That's a fairly long introduction but I don't think we can address the portrayals of God in the First and Second Testaments without first appreciating the inter-connectedness of the two. But this

interconnectedness, or dependence, between the two Testaments leaves us with a particular problem when it comes to some portrayals and images of God in the First Testament.

Because of time limitations we can only explore one portrayal of God where the First and Second Testaments seem at odds with one another; violence and peace. Given my introductory comments about the inextricable links between the First and Second Testaments and the importance of holding the two together the issue of violence and peace possibly presents the greatest challenge. I don't propose a concrete answer, because I'm not sure there is one, but I will suggest some ways of looking at the issue of violence and peace which might help us to think about the issue more clearly.

### The texts of terror – just three examples

- Genesis 22 – Violence against family

<sup>2</sup> Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love--Isaac--and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." (Gen 22:2 NIV)

- Leviticus – Violence against fellow citizens

<sup>10</sup> "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife--with the wife of his neighbor--both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death. (Lev 20:10 NIV)

- Deuteronomy 20 – Violence against foreigners

<sup>16</sup> However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes.

<sup>17</sup> Completely destroy them--the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites--as the LORD your God has commanded you.

<sup>18</sup> Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God. (Deu 20:16-18 NIV)

### Two types of violence in the First Testament

Before trying to understand these texts and others like them it's important to be aware that there are two types of violence recorded in the First Testament. There is divinely sanctioned violence and then there is violence committed but individuals and groups of people independently of divine command. Tonight we're focusing on divinely commanded violence but it is important to highlight that the practice of violence in the ancient world should not be viewed as abnormal. While we might object to violent actions as immoral there was no such morality in the ancient world. In fact, most times, it was necessary to fight for survival and even plan your battle strategy pre-emptively (see 2 Sam. 11:1) otherwise you would have been obliterated yourself by other nations acting against you.

Our focus tonight though is divinely sanctioned violence and how God would possibly say/command than kind of thing from any human being and, what's more, could we imagine Jesus (God manifest in the flesh) saying the same kind of thing? Without wanting to downplay the 'problem' of divinely sanctioned violence it must also be said that this kind of violence is in fact rare in the First Testament. Still it is an issue which we must wrestle with. I want to take each account mentioned above in turn as examples of divinely sanctioned violence in the First Testament and see if we can understand them.

## Violence against family (Gen. 22)

There are plenty of stories in the First Testament where people act violently towards family members. However, divinely sanctioned violence against family members is rare in the First Testament. Still the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 ought to disturb us. How could God tell anyone to kill their son?

The first thing for us to understand here is that child sacrifice was common practice in the world of Abraham. While we find the whole idea abhorrent and Abraham, being flesh and blood, would no doubt be deeply troubled by such a divine command, he would not have been surprised. So what is happening here? Could we imagine Jesus commanding one of his followers to kill their son? The Abraham-Isaac story would be more disturbing if we didn't know how it turned out but fortunately we do. Just as Abraham is about to kill his son he is stopped and God provides an animal for the sacrifice. Isaac is safe, at least for now!

Clearly this is divinely sanctioned violence but it seems that there is a purpose in God's command. Perhaps in the early stages of Abraham getting to know God part of the learning was to see that God was *not like* Abraham's perceptions of other gods in his world. While it would be perfectly normal for people of Abraham's time to sacrifice children to their gods this God might command such a thing but would never allow it to be carried through.

When thinking about God's command to Abraham we ought not to overlook the fact that Jesus also said something about family and violence! In Matthew 10:34:

<sup>34</sup> "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

<sup>35</sup> For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law--

<sup>36</sup> a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' (Mat 10:34-36 NIV)

Most would agree that this is not to be taken literally but again, just like God in the Abraham story, Jesus is using imagery and language to help his listeners understand seriousness of the call to be a follower.

## Violence against fellow citizens (Lev. 20)

Some of the commands which are given to the Israelites as part of the covenant disturb us as well. How could a person be stoned to death for committing adultery? If that's so then most of the Israelites should probably have been killed and so should most of us! This case of stoning for committing adultery is an interesting one because we can see a direct contrast, or some may say contradiction, here between the God of the First Testament and Jesus of the Second Testament. Jesus' response to the woman caught in adultery was effectively to contradict the requirements outlined in Leviticus. He wouldn't stone the woman and he challenged those without sin to do it for him. Of course none of them could because they realized that they had all missed the mark in one way or another.

It's interesting to note that as we read on in the First Testament many people (usually men) committed various forms of adultery. However, there is not one case where a person is stoned to death for such an act. Were the Israelites just soft or was the law actually saying something different to what might seem to be the case? One of the problems that modern readers have is an overly enthusiastic desire to read texts literally. In our culture we seem to struggle to get it when writers are using figures of speech and even exaggeration to get a point across. Jesus does it in Matthew 10 mentioned above.

Could it be that Leviticus is doing the same thing? Adultery is painted as such a destructive action for societies and for being fully human that the penalty prescribed is death by stoning. In a sense whether anyone was ever stoned to death or not was not the point. The point Leviticus may be making is that this kind of action is really destructive to individuals, communities and humanity as a whole. So, don't do it!

### Violence against foreigners (Deut. 20)

Most of you are probably familiar with stories where the Israelites destroyed a place with all its inhabitants such as the defeat of Jericho and instances where they were commanded to everyone and everything as commanded and didn't such as Ai. But whether they did or didn't destroy everyone and everything, the more troubling aspect to these stories is that God commanded it. Would Jesus have said to anyone, 'Go into that city, raze it to the ground and leave nothing that has breath alive!' My brief answer to this is, 'No, Jesus would not have said such a thing.'

These instances are the most problematic ones for those of us who want to argue that the God of the First Testament is the same as the one revealed in Jesus Christ. I will make some suggestions which each have their own problems and challenges but will probably get you thinking about the issues involved.

- God actually said it and that settles it! Whatever one thinks of the morality of killing every last living being it ought to be done *because* God decrees it and people are not in a position to question it. The problem with this view is that it misses two critical factors. Killing people, at least some of whom were innocent, is morally reprehensible and, therefore, morally indefensible. Second, the narrative suggests that the people did not actually do this in every case anyway. In fact in Deuteronomy 7 it decrees complete destruction of people and then in the very next breath says that the Israelites are not to inter-marry with the people they will supposedly exterminate! Could there be something else going on here?
- God didn't really say that people were to commit this kind of violence in the first place. Even though the text, in places, clearly states that God said, God didn't really say it at all. They just thought that God said it. If this is true it lets those of us who deplore this kind of violence and can't imagine Jesus ever commanding such a thing, us off the hook. Before dismissing such a view it is important to recognize that ancient people would have, by default, believed that their god/s commanded them to do what they did. This was one way in which the ancient world worked. To imagine any kind of conquest or killing *not in the name of* and often even *not under the direct command of* their god/s would be unthinkable. If you went out to battle you believed that your god/s wanted you to kill and destroy. The problem with this view, particularly those of us with a high view of the Bible, is that it challenges the very nature of the text we are dealing with. There are too many associated issues to go into this in detail tonight but there are some who have presented thoughtful perspectives on this very issue.
- One final way of viewing these passages is to recognize that the First Testament often uses exaggeration to get a point across. We sometimes miss this if we take a more literal approach to reading the text. We need to remember that these stories were originally told aloud to people rather than read. Hyperbole is one way in which a story is brought to life and impacts an audience, even today. The problem with this view is that it leaves us wondering what exaggeration is and what it is not.

## Conclusion

So, what can we conclude about the question, 'Did God really say that?' I think an honest answer would be that we can never be quite sure. But we can draw some conclusions that might help us toward an answer:

- We can't simply ignore the First Testament because it is affirmed in the Second Testament, violence and all.
- We need to read commands of violence within the broader context of both First and Second Testaments which strongly affirm that God is life-giving, gracious and desiring peace and reconciliation.
- We need to grapple with the very real issue of imagining Jesus in the place of God in the First Testament and whether we could imagine Jesus commanding the things that God commanded. If we can't imagine this then perhaps what we have is only a part understanding or even a misunderstanding of God in those parts where violence is decreed.

In any case this issues alongside others keeps us working at understanding the biblical text, God and ourselves which is only ever a positive outcome.