

The Character of “The Old Testament God”

Introduction

Recently, I had an email conversation with a brand new acquaintance; and during the course of that conversation, I happened to ask him if he had any interest in theology. Here is an excerpt from his response to that question:

I LOVE Jesus. He’s my man. I just don’t like the bible. The God of the old testament is a very angry violent god - can’t be the same being that created the universe. Anyone advanced enough to create a universe cannot possibly be that petty and cruel.

As it turns out, I have heard responses similar to the one above multiple times in the past. The basic belief is as follows:

“Jesus is great and wonderful - so everyone should follow him. However, the ‘God of the Old Testament’ is *evil* - so everyone should completely ignore Yahweh.”

So, let’s explore that belief. In other words, let’s see if we can determine the character of Yahweh, from the Old Testament - as well as examining the actions of Jesus.

Is Yahweh a God of violence and war?

Certainly, there are a number of passages in the Old Testament which discuss warfare and violence - i.e., God telling the Israelites to kill everyone in Jericho, the Mosaic law stoning of adulterers, God wiping out the entire earth with the flood, etc.

From my experience, people who hold the “Yahweh is evil” belief tend to focus *solely* on those passages - i.e., they appear to think that that is *all* that the Old Testament has to say about Yahweh. As a result, they seem to think that Yahweh takes “pleasure” in causing death and destruction.

So, let’s take a look at some of the *other* Old Testament passages, which describe the character of our Heavenly Father:

Ezekiel 18:32 (ESV):

³² For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.”

Psalms 86:5,15 (ESV):

⁵For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive,
And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.

¹⁵But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.

1 Chronicles 28:2-3 (ESV):

²Then King David rose to his feet and said: “Hear me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD and for the footstool of our God, and I made preparations for building. ³But God said to me, ‘You may not build a house for my name, for you are a man of war and have shed blood.’

The above passages tell me that Yahweh does not take any pleasure in death and destruction. Instead, He explicitly calls for people to repent - so that they will **live!** In addition, those passages state that God is *always* ready to forgive us - i.e., He does not want to be angry with us; instead, He wants to be in a loving relationship with us.

Finally, the passage in 1 Chronicles indicates to me that God does *not* like warfare - because the entire reason why David was not able to build the temple was because he had fought in *too many wars!*

Now, consider this verse - which Yahweh commanded:

Leviticus 19:18 (ESV):

¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

As we can see, the “love your neighbor as yourself” command was initially stated by **Yahweh!** (From what I have seen, most Christians assume that Jesus just “made up” that command. Far from it - in fact, Jesus was directly quoting *Yahweh.*)

What did Jesus say and do?

Now, let’s take a look at some of the statements and actions of Jesus. First of all, let’s see what Jesus has to say about the character of his Father:

Matthew 5:48 (ESV):

⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Luke 11:13 (ESV):

¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Matthew 26:39 (ESV):

³⁹ And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

The above passages are quite enlightening. First off, Jesus tells us that our Heavenly Father is “perfect” - i.e., that He has impeccable morals and behavior. Jesus also states that God has infinitely *better* behavior than *we* do - that is, however good we think we are, God is far better.

Finally - and most importantly - Jesus explicitly *submits* his own will to God's will. In other words, he chooses to do God's will, *instead* of doing his own will. Let's think about that for a moment. If Jesus is good - and God is evil - then why would Jesus ever choose to do God's will, instead of his own? That would be tantamount to Jesus choosing to do evil!

So, the fact that Jesus does Yahweh's will - and the fact that Jesus is good - tells me that *Yahweh* is good.

Now, let's see if Jesus attributes his words and actions to anyone:

John 5:19 (ESV):

¹⁹So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

John 5:30 (ESV):

³⁰ "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

John 14:8-10 (ESV):

⁸ Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

The above passages are also quite informative about our Heavenly Father. Jesus explicitly states that everything that he says and does is an *exact* "reflection" of what Yahweh says and does. In other words, Jesus is a perfect "image" of Yahweh (as the apostle Paul states.)

So, let's think about this for a moment. From the above passages, I draw the following conclusions:

- Everything that Jesus said and did is good.
- Everything that Jesus said and did is **exactly** what Yahweh would say and do.
- Therefore, everything that *Yahweh* says and does is good - *not* evil.

Who, exactly, is "the Father" that Jesus refers to?

From my experience, most people who hold the "Yahweh is evil" belief seem to think that there is *no relationship whatsoever* between Yahweh and Jesus. In other words, those people appear to believe that Yahweh is **NOT** the father of Jesus!

As it turns out, Jesus quoted the Old Testament multiple times during his ministry - and in some of those occasions, he explicitly quoted passages which contain the *name* Yahweh (the four Hebrew characters YHWH). Here are some examples:

Luke 4:16-19 (ESV - quoting Isaiah 61):

¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord (YHWH) is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Luke 20:41-44 (ESV - quoting Psalm 110):

⁴¹ But he said to them, “How can they say that the Christ is David’s son? ⁴²For David himself says in the Book of Psalms,

“The Lord (YHWH) said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, ⁴³until I make your enemies your footstool.’

⁴⁴David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?”

In both of the above passages, the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus quoted refer to the divine name - YHWH. As a result, it certainly appears to me that Jesus **IS** the Son of Yahweh!

Conclusion

I won’t deny it - there are *some* passages in the Bible which are rather “troubling” to me.

In particular, the encounter at Jericho - in which God ordered the Israelites to kill *every* man, woman and *child* in the entire city - is very difficult for me to accept.

However, do those difficult passages cause me to just “throw out” the Old Testament? Certainly not! After all, Jesus and the apostles quoted the Old Testament - favorably - over and over again.

From my perspective, one item to keep in mind is that God has much more knowledge and reasoning ability than we do - and therefore, it is difficult for us to see God’s purposes on many occasions. Consider this passage:

Isaiah 55:8-9 (ESV):

⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

In addition, consider this very famous verse:

John 3:16 (ESV):

¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

In my view, since God was willing to give His only *Son*, for wretched sinners like *me*, that should cause us to give Him “the benefit of the doubt”.

In other words, the fact that Yahweh loves us so much, that He allowed his Son to die for us, should persuade us to *trust* Him - even when we don't understand everything that He does.