

The Old Testament God



The Old Testament God

- To the casual reader, Yahweh as depicted in the Old Testament seems like a kind and loving father one moment, and a violent, vengeful tyrant the next.
- How can we reconcile the Yahweh of the Old Testament with the Abba of the New?

Worship and Praise

- Yahweh demands to be worshipped and praised.
- God wanted what was best for the Israelites, as he wants what is best for us: the greatest happiness of man is to worship and praise his Creator.

Jealousy

- Yahweh will not tolerate other gods; he is jealous and demands exclusive fidelity.
- God entered into a marriage covenant with the Israelites: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." (Ex. 6:7); a certain amount of jealousy is appropriate in a marriage covenant.
- The Israelites provoked Yahweh's jealousy by being fickle and chasing after other gods even after all that Yahweh had done for them.

Demand for Human Sacrifice

- Yahweh demands the sacrifice of Isaac, which seems immoral and illogical.
- God ordered Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a test; the preliminary test was sending Ishmael away.
- The test of Abraham was like the test of Job; to trust in God no matter what, even when life doesn't make sense.
- The test of Abraham is also a foreshadowing of God's sacrifice of his only Son.
- Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac showed his fidelity to Yahweh; the Father's willingness to sacrifice his Son shows his fidelity to us.

Gradual Revelation

- Yahweh reveals moral truth gradually, which seems to permit actions that we consider immoral today.
- The Israelites lived during a brutal time, surrounded by brutal neighbors who influenced their world view.
- The sudden abolition of slavery didn't eradicate racism; the sudden introduction of democracy in North Korea wouldn't eliminate oppression.
- Yahweh knew better than to reveal the fullness of truth all at once. The Israelites weren't ready for it!
- That's why the law of Moses was temporary, as the New Testament admits (divorce, stoning, slavery, revenge, warfare that included killing non-combatants).

Gradual Revelation

- Example: *Kabloona*, by Gontran de Poncins (1941).
- The author observed such customs as wife-swapping, 20-hour feasts, killing in response to theft, and female infanticide.
- When the author met a missionary priest who worked with the Eskimos, he wondered why the priest didn't openly condemn these practices.
- The priest's response? "You gotta face facts."
- His job was to help the Eskimos adopt Christianity, little by little, like helping a chain smoker to cut back gradually.
- Also, he recognized that killing deterred theft and that female infanticide was a last-resort survival strategy.

Harsh Punishments

- The Law of Moses prescribes stoning for blasphemy, sorcery, Sabbath violation, idolatry, and grave parental disobedience (“gluttons and drunkards”).
- Harsh punishments were the norm back then! Mosaic Law was much more lenient than Babylonian, Assyrian and Egyptian law, which prescribed 100-lash beatings and bodily mutilations.
- Harsh punishments taught the Israelites a life-and-death lesson: Yahweh’s laws were sacred, and the covenant mattered more than anything else.
- For example, in 2 Sam. 6:1-7, Uzzah tried to steady the tottering ark as it was being transported on an ox-cart; God struck him down on the spot.

Harsh Punishments

- The lesson? An oxcart was not a valid transport, and no man was allowed to touch the ark.
- The Covenant was everything! Anyone who broke the Covenant was considered a threat to society.
- Lev. 21:9 – the priest and his family were considered sacred, just as the ark was sacred.
- 2 Sam. 24:14-15 – David chose the most merciful of the punishments; also, his own relatives were just as vulnerable as anyone else.
- In Ex. 21:22-30 we see severity but mercy.

Genocide

- Yahweh commands the indiscriminate massacre and ethnic cleansing of the Canaanites; how can this be?
- The Canaanites were extremely depraved: evil sadistic gods, adultery, bestiality, homosexuality, incest, child sacrifice, the ripping open of pregnant women.
- Exaggeration was common in ancient war accounts:
 - Egyptian Tuthmosis III boasted: "The numerous army of Mitanni was overthrown within the hour, annihilated totally, like those not existent." (1500 B.C.)
 - Hittite Mursilli II said that he made "Mt. Asharpaya and the mountains of Tarikarimu empty of humanity." (1300 B.C.)
 - Egyptian Ramses II wrote that he slew "the entire

Genocide

- force of the Hittites" and "all the chiefs of all the countries." (1275 B.C.)
- Moabite King Mesha bragged that the Northern Kingdom of "Israel has utterly perished for always," over a century before the Assyrian conquest (840 B.C.)
- The massacre of the Canaanites was incomplete; Yahweh wanted the obliteration of their religion and customs, not the indiscriminate murder of every last person.
- Joshua 13 and subsequent chapters indicate that much of the Promised Land remained unconquered.

Genocide

- “For if you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations, these which remain among you, and intermarry with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know with certainty that the Lord your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you.” (Josh. 23:12-13)
- In Dt. 7:1-6 we hear of doom for the pagans, but survival for some.
- Dispossession is NOT the same as annihilation.
- Most Canaanite cities (like Jericho, Ai, and Hazor) were military forts; civilians generally lived in rural areas.
- Any civilians living in the cities would likely have

Genocide

- evacuated by the time the Israelites arrived to lay siege.
- The “ban” (herem) applied to men, women, children, and livestock, but this doesn’t mean that women and children were necessarily present.
- Fr. Casey video
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmo4sUsjTLI>)