

‘God, what’s with all the violence in the Old Testament?’

We are in the midst of a series called, God, I have a question! We asked you to give to us questions that you or your unchurched friend might ask God and today we're looking at ‘God, What’s with all the violence in the Old Testament?’

This is a great question that many others both in and outside the church have questioned through the years...what about all the violence in the Old Testament; especially when read in connection to Jesus Christ as the representative of God in the New Testament.

I grew up not thinking twice about violence in the bible. I was told about Noah rescuing the furry little animals two by two, not connecting the dots enough to realise that people were drowning out there. I was taught that the Bible was about forgiveness, so that was my focus: getting forgiven, and boy did I need a lot of forgiveness. Hitting was a sin, especially when it came to my sisters, as were lying, stealing, swearing, smoking and in some families playing cards. As a teen I started to understand my faith a bit more but when it came to wars and such, I figured that was God's business, and the politicians I guess. I just wanted to go to heaven when the rapture came and leave all that "wars and rumours of wars" stuff behind on earth. I remember the first time I heard of something called pacifism: My response was that it sounded incredibly impractical.

As I grew into adulthood, of course, I gave these matters a bit more of the thought they deserved. But I still have had some major questions so it has been good to do a bit more reading and research over recent years.

So let’s take a relatively brief look at the question of God and violence in the OT.

We will start in Psalms, the longest book in the OT, it’s a book of songs or poems to be sung or spoken as prayers. Some of the Psalms are very famous – *The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures...*

Many of the bible's main themes are echoed in the Psalms – praise, thankfulness, faith, sorrow for sin, God's loyalty and help. The writers of the Psalms always express their true feelings, whether they are praising God for his blessing or complaining in time of trouble.

Listen to Psalms 136 – every second line is “His faithful love endures forever”

¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good!

His faithful love endures forever.

⁵ Give thanks to him who made the heavens so skilfully.

His faithful love endures forever.

⁶ Give thanks to him who placed the earth among the waters.

His faithful love endures forever.

¹⁰ Give thanks to him who killed the firstborn of Egypt.

His faithful love endures forever.

¹³ Give thanks to him who parted the Red Sea.

His faithful love endures forever.

¹⁴ He led Israel safely through,

His faithful love endures forever.

¹⁵ but he hurled Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea.

His faithful love endures forever.

Now that psalms sends mixed messages?

Now listen to the next Psalm - Psalm 137 made famous by Boney M - it starts off

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down

Ye-eah we wept, when we remembered Zion.

The Israelites where in exile, Babylon away from Jerusalem, and they were unhappy and the final verse of the original song of Psalm 137 (Boney M’s version doesn’t include this) - goes

⁸ *O Babylon, you will be destroyed.*

*Happy is the one who pays you back
for what you have done to us.*

⁹ *Happy is the one who takes your babies
and smashes them against the rocks!*

What!! You can’t say that in church! The bible can’t encourage that sort of attitude. Church is meant to be a family show!

In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins refers to the God of the Old Testament as “a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser.” Journalist Christopher Hitchens complains that the Old Testament contains a warrant for “indiscriminate massacre.” Other critics of Christianity have levelled similar charges, accusing Yahweh of “crimes against humanity.”

Some Early Church leaders could not reconcile the differences. They believed and preached that the deity represented in the Old Testament was not the God and Father of Jesus Christ. For them, Yahweh of the Old Testament did not have the same purpose as God the Father and Jesus Christ. Those teaching were later rejected.

John Wesley questioned the violence in the Old Testament, “Some scripture is not fit for Christian lips.” Later he says, “To attribute such atrocities to God is an outrage against his character and makes him “more false, more cruel, and more unjust than the devil...”

There are passages of Scripture that cause us Christians to squirm a bit in our seats. Throughout Leviticus the death penalty is called for those who engage in homosexuality, adultery, practice witchcraft, curse their father or mother, sleep around, blaspheme...not to mention the rest of the Pentateuch where God seems to demand the death of those who fail to listen to their spiritual leaders, those who worship another god, those who are not virgins on their wedding night, and those who work on the Sabbath.

Not to mention other places where God seems to, at the very least, condone violence:

- Of course there is Noah’s story
- God kills the firstborn child of every Egyptian.
- Samson prays for a last bit of strength to destroy the temple and kill everyone inside.
- In 2 Kings 2:23-24, the prophet Elisha calls out bears to eat a couple of rowdy boys who are making fun of his bald spot.

We could go on and on with passages throughout the Old Testament that make us uncomfortable.

Theological Foundations

For us as Christians, we have two theological issues that stand front and central for us. First, we believe that God is good, and, connected to this, God is love.

In Psalm 136:1, Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His faithful love endures forever.

1 John 4:8, “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

God being good, God being love are foundational to our faith...and when we read texts about God ordering or seemingly condoning murder and violence, it is troubling.

Second, we believe that Jesus represents God perfectly. Hebrews 1:3 talks about, *“The Son radiates God’s own glory and expresses the very character of God,”*

This Jesus, who perfectly represents God, says things like:

- Love your enemies,
- do good to those who persecute you,
- those who live by the sword die by the sword...
- and then rather than resist, fight back, or allow his disciples to take up arms in his defence...He is beaten and dies on the cross.

This does not seem compatible with some of the stories in the Old Testament. And yet, we are also committed to the Old Testament as part of our Scripture. Often what happens is we just ignore or rush past these violent passages of Scripture. We don’t allow ourselves to think about it, because we just aren’t sure how to deal with them.

So we resort to a few common explanations:

- God doesn’t fit into our categories of good and bad
- Everything God does is good, even if we don’t understand it
- The Bible is inerrant with everything it says, so what it says we have to accept at face value – we don’t ask questions.
- This was just God meeting people where they were at in this time

While these help us keep reading and keep following, they also allow us to dodge our responsibility to wrestle with this issue...

So here are a few ways that I have wrestled with this issue: **This is punishment for sin, or consequences to sin.**

When I was a kid my parents used one of those parentisms that we all have come to hate...and then use ourselves... “This is going to hurt me more than it

hurts you!” My thought was, “Why don’t you just smack yourself, why should both of us suffer?”

We realize, years later, there is some truth to that. We struggle to discipline our children because it hurts them, but we do it because we want them to be better people in the long run.

Our sins have consequences, and sometimes God brings punishment for our sin. And we forget how often God holds his punishment in the hope that people will repent and turn from their sins.

In Genesis 15:13-16, God is leading Abraham through the area of Canaan, and says, *“Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, **for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.**”*

The Canaanites were a brutal, warring group that indulged in all kinds of horrific behaviour. They were known for deviant sexuality, drunkenness, murder, rape, and child sacrifice. They regularly attacked and brutally killed their neighbours. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities are destroyed because there was not a single righteous person to be found inside its walls.

Years later the Israelites will be judged and carried off to Babylon because they fail to live obediently to God...but only after years and years and years of God pleading with them to repent and turn back to him.

Sometimes, the texts we see as violent in Scripture, remind us that our sins have consequences. Some people, some cultures, are so violent and evil that many feel blessed by God if they stop it by any means necessary.

We have to be careful with this line of reasoning, but there are times when God steps in to put an end to the evil people are inflicting on others. It is not our place to assume the role of God and decide when that time is, and we have to be extremely careful...because there have been times in our history when leaders, driven by their own selfish gain, have used this to cover up their own evil.

Another way of dealing with this is... **This is the cultural reality.**

The Bible is a brutally honest book, it doesn't hide things to make its characters look good. We live in a fallen world that does not function as God intended. And in the midst of this, God restricts himself and uses sinful men and women to do His will.

Habakkuk 1:5-7

“Look at the nations and watch— and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own.

They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honour.”

God tells Habakkuk He is going to use the Babylonians, an empire more sinful than Judah, to punish Judah. Habakkuk questions God about this. God's response in Habakkuk 2 is that while the Babylonians are instruments of judgment, they too will be judged for the methods they use and the sinfulness they inflict on others.

The reality of the land where Israel was headed was a violent land with warring tribes battling for existence. In order to exist as a people, they would have to fight for existence. They would need to defend themselves.

Peter Craigie, a scholar on violence in the OT says, “it is evident that without the use of force the state of Israel would not have come into existence.”

I am reminded there will be aspects of our culture that we take for granted that one day, people will look back on and consider us sinful for having participated in. We look back over more recent years at attitudes of anti-women in ministry, at those who practiced slavery, or Apartheid in South Africa, and wonder how they missed the sinfulness of that? At the time, they didn't see it. It was a “natural” part of their culture. I am occasionally challenged by the question, what parts of our current culture will someday be regarded as sin...and am I condoning something simply because it is a natural part of my culture?

The most helpful understanding for me has been the realization that... **The Old Testament is not a Christian document.**

Before you get think I'm dismissing the OT as part of the word of God, I'm not. We do need to remember the bible is one big story and that the Old Testament

is first and foremost a record of how God started with one man, Abraham, and developed a nation in order to lead up Jesus Christ. It is a document that shows growth in how we human beings understood and communicated with God. God, leading and growing and challenging people to take that next step.

John Bright, a respected Old Testament scholar, comments, “The Old testament is a document of the faith of Israel and only secondarily a document of the church. Its message is not, of itself, a Christian message.”

Most of us will know this, but it sounds strange to say it out loud. The Old Testament is a document that leads up to and puts in context the Gospel message of Jesus Christ.

As I was reading around this topic I came across this comment; Jesus took the Old Testament seriously, found God in it, but he himself rejected that everything in it was a directive from God...even passages written as though God had said them.

Let me elaborate by quoting some commentator who knows more than me, “While Jesus affirmed the Hebrew Scriptures as the authentic Word of God, he did not endorse every word in them as God’s.

- He rejected some Torah texts as representing the original will of God, such as Moses’ divorce laws (Mark 10:4-9).
- Moses’ laws governing vengeance were superseded with his new ethic of active nonviolent resistance of ‘overcoming evil with good’.
- His command to ‘love your enemies’ represents a total rejection of Moses’ genocidal commands and stands in judgment on Joshua’s campaign of ethnic cleansing.
- In his word of pardon to the woman taken in adultery, Jesus contravened the clear rulings of the Torah calling for adulterers to be put to death.
- It is clear that Jesus exercised bold prophetic authority over the Torah and on how it was to be interpreted.”

It seems that Jesus took some passages of Scripture that were written as though God had said them, and proclaimed they were written by humans and did not represent the ultimate will of God. You and I are not Jesus and must be careful, but this certainly reminds us that we are to read the Scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ.

Have you ever put on a pair of those pink sunglasses? They give everything this weird glow and everything looks pink. Even a regular pair of sunglasses will cause everything to take on a certain shade.

When you and I read Scripture, we should have on a pair of Jesus glasses. Jesus Christ is the lens through which we read, interpret, and understand Scripture. So, when I come to a passage in the Old Testament that doesn't ring true with Jesus, I wrestle with it, pray about it, study and read, and then allow Jesus to be the final voice.

Conclusion

Our world is filled with unspeakable violence and evil. Recently, a young man walked into a church in the states and shot and killed 9 people simply because of their race. It has become an almost daily occurrence for someone to blow themselves up in the name of God.

Since Sept. 11", we've been marinating in the issue of religious violence, day after day. One day we see a shaky video from the Middle East featuring terrorists blowing up a military vehicle, with shouts of "Allahu Akbar!" ("God is great!") in the background. Another day we hear some Christian leader say, "Blow them all away in the name of the Lord." Another day we read about Israel Defence Forces destroying the homes of Palestinians, defending their actions on the grounds that God promised them the land 4,000 years ago. And the day after that, we hear another Christian leader defending their actions, and urging the world to join Israel in a war against Iran.

There are a whole lot of misguided people who claim to be following God, the media love highlight the extremists ...and the Old Testament reveals to us that many people will claim to do things on behalf of God but are actually serving their own self-interests.

In dealing with questions like this I have found that one single question helps remind and align my question: What about Jesus?

If I want to know about the character of God, how God would act and respond in certain situations, how would God respond to enemies and those who want to hurt me, how would God respond to sinful people around him...I start with Jesus. I follow his lead and try to learn from and develop his character in my life...

When I read the Old Testament, I ask does this represent what I know about the character of Jesus Christ?