

12-14-25: Houston, we have a problem

1 Samuel 15:2 "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."

Matthew 5:43-45 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

What the heck? Let me read parts of those again. put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys. And love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

Houston, we have a problem. What follows may not seem like it has anything to do with Christmas, the Incarnation, but it does.

The following excerpts are from a brilliant article by John Whitsett titled:

Reconciling the OT and NT God

One of the cornerstones of Christian theology is God's immutability—the belief His character is fixed and does not change over the course of time. But when we read in the Old Testament that God occasionally asked His people to obliterate everyone, including women and children, when they swept through a community and conquered it, it puzzles us.

A lot of people are turned off by the way God is pictured in the Old Testament. In 2 Samuel 24, when King David decided to take a census of the men of fighting age, God dispatched the prophet Gad to him to announce His displeasure with this decision. The scripture reads "*The Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand people died.*" Seems like the punishment didn't fit the crime. David makes a decision that displeases God and 70,000 Israelites die? How can this action be reconciled with a God of mercy, compassion, and love? How do we resolve a God who called for the total annihilation of the Canaanites with a Jesus who broke bread with sinners, ministered to prostitutes and adulterers and, while hanging on the cross, prayed for his accusers. There is an incredible disconnect! Yah!

Whitsett continues. A number of years ago—when I was a teen—there was a popular bumper sticker that said, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it!” While I understand the aim of that sticker, I also believe we often bring that overly simplistic mentality to how we read the Bible. Not to say we shouldn’t trust or believe what we read in the Bible. But that very black-and-white mindset can get us into hot water when it comes to some of the things we encounter in the Old Testament. For instance, if “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it!” is true, then we have to conclude that genocide is, in some situations, morally acceptable. Reading the Bible through that lens can open the door to all manner of atrocity—something the human race has proven very adept at doing ... **projecting our violence onto God in an attempt to assuage our conscience by an imagined divine sanction for our actions.** That is important. I will read it again. **projecting our violence onto God in an attempt to assuage our conscience by an imagined divine sanction for our actions.**

But to say God is not immutable—that His character is not fixed and His nature is changing and evolving as time marches on—is equally disquieting. For if God’s character is not fixed, then the foundation of our faith is unsettled. What’s to say He won’t, at some point, change back? Here’s where I’ve landed: I’ve concluded that what needs to change is not our understanding of the consistency and decency of God’s character. What needs to change is how we understand the Old Testament.

When Jesus began his public ministry, John the Baptist emerged—pointing the people of his day to Jesus’ supremacy and superiority. In our day, the Bible serves a similar role—its purpose is to point people to Jesus. John the Baptist was sent by God, but he was not God. By the same token, while the Old Testament was inspired by God, it is not God. Thus, it is not the perfect revelation of God’s nature or character—**Jesus is!** The unblemished disclosure of God is not found in a book; it’s found in a person! The Bible’s purpose is to point us to Jesus, which means **our priority should not be on the pointing finger but on that toward which the finger points.**

So—what are we to make of these heinous and horrifying passages in the Old Testament? Here’s what I’ve come to believe: The Old Testament is not so much a revelation of the character and nature of God as it is an account of Israel’s coming to understand the character and nature of their God. Along the way, they made some wrong assumptions. Some of their ideas about who He was and what He was like were drawn from what the neighboring peoples of the ancient Near East believed about their gods. The Old Testament was written in a time when violence was seen as part of God’s way of accomplishing his purposes. They

attributed to God words, commands, and deeds they believed He'd have authorized or done. What this means is that the Old Testament passages about violence, bloodshed, and destruction tell us more about what the people who wrote them believed and the times in which they lived than about the God in whose name they claimed the authority to do those things.

When a passage is at odds with Jesus' life and example, we need to consider that it may reflect the culture, worldview, and perspectives of the human author more than it does the heart, character, and nature of God.

When we approach the Bible in this way, it will liberate us from some of the feelings of confusion and embarrassment that accompany defending a God who supposedly asked His followers to do some reprehensible and disgraceful stuff. And, hopefully, it will also keep us from repeating some of the contemptible things those who profess allegiance to Him, and who've used the Bible to justify and validate them, have done over the years. **For the conclusive and definitive revelation of God is not a collection of documents called "The Bible." It's a person named Jesus!**

End Quote

If I spoke the above in a fundamentalist church that interprets the Bible literally, I would see a big stake outside with people piling burnable brush around the base and it wouldn't be for the congregation to sit around the fire after the service roasting marshmallows singing Kum By Yah. You folks aren't going to burn me at the stake.

AI can be useful. You can ask a question, and it will look at numerous relevant articles and sum them up. I googled. "How do Quakers interpret the Bible?"

Quakers view the Bible as a sacred text but not the ultimate authority, which they believe is the "inward light" or direct experience of God's spirit in each person. They read scripture through the lens of this inner experience, using it as a source of inspiration and guidance, but not a final word. Literal interpretations are often questioned in favor of seeking the divine spirit within, which is believed to continue to reveal truth today.

If all the Christian denominations had an enlightened view like that, the world would be better place.

I have said before that I cannot buy into substitutionary atonement as an explanation for the incarnation and the crucifixion. I cannot believe in a God whose anger could only be assuaged by the cruel sacrifice of His son. I cannot believe that as the purpose of the incarnation.

Here is a very simplistic explanation of the incarnation. God speaks, "Gabriel, did you see how my chosen people just wiped out an entire neighboring tribe? Then they write about it as if I condoned their actions!" Gabriel responds, "Duh! So, what's new? Remember when you were creating everything and I told you to stop at dogs because you weren't going to top that? Did you listen? Nope. Had to keep going and make humans and how has that worked out?" God, "Your point is well taken but I'm not ready to give up on them yet but I sure am getting tired of being portrayed as a heinous jerk. I don't know how to get through to them. If I could walk among my people in the flesh as one of them then I could tell and show them what I am really like. I've got it! Gabriel, there is an amazing young woman in an obscure village in Galilee named Mary. There is a message I want you to take to her. When you appear to Mary tone it down. Can the loud boom and flash of light." Gabriel, "Can I keep the part where I come out of a cloud of smoke? That is my favorite part." God, "Ok but not too much smoke. I hope Mary says yes. My people take the wrong path over and over again, but I love them so much. How I long to walk, touch, and laugh with them as one of them. I want to hold and comfort my people. I will stand up for them and confront their oppressors no matter the cost."

When we lived in Beaverton, I heard a sermon explaining the incarnation that I have never forgotten. It went like this. *I bet at some time you have had a bird fly into your garage or house through an open door or window. You notice the bird perched in a corner. You get a broom and try to gently push/guide the bird towards the opening. All you seem to do is frighten the bird. The bird flies around bumping into things and you are concerned that the bird might get hurt. To the bird you are a threat, unpredictable. You think, "If I could become a bird then I could approach the bird and assuage its fears. I could calm the bird down and lead it to safety."*

God loves us more than we can imagine. Thank you. Merry Christmas.