

God of the Old Testament Vs. God of Jesus Christ*

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Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son [who is] the exact imprint of God's very being. Hebrews 1.1-3

...There are three terms we need to become familiar with: 1) Concession, 2) Accommodation, and 3) the Ideal.

Let's talk about *concession* first, and I'll try and keep this brief. Imagine with me that I am a missionary and I have just landed in an undeveloped area of this world with a few unique characteristics. First, the people there have never seen a white person before. (Imagine them poking my skin repeatedly). Second, they are cannibals (which may be why they were poking my skin: checking my tenderness, come to think of it). And, lastly, they had some unique beliefs. They are a very violent people who worship their dead ancestors, and once a year, they offer in sacrifice a new-born baby in a religious ceremony in honor of their dead ancestors. Now, here is the challenge: I am a follower of Jesus and I am going to try to win them to following Jesus too. However, I can't just bulldoze over their existing culture. I have to work slowly with these people. If I were to push them too far and too fast, I would wind up losing them and maybe even end up on their plates. So, what should I do? What would you start with first? I don't know about you, but the first place I would start is to try to get them to offer an animal instead of those babies once a year. (With the intent that I would eventually get them away from even doing that!)

But, while I'm working on that, I'm going to have to concede, or ignore, those other things. What would be supremely unfair is if someone were to make a judgment about what I believed, based on the time I was working with this barbaric culture. It would be a gross misrepresentation of who I am. I actually do this on a regular basis. When I get to a church for a weekend event, I have to size that church up rather quickly, decide what areas to leave alone and what areas God would have me address that weekend. Some fish are bigger fish to fry than others, and I'm there for only a short time. Where am I going to do the most good in the shortest amount of time? But, for someone to assume that I believe everything that church believes just because I didn't address something would be a grossly unfair assumption. This leads me to my point.

The God we see in the Old Testament is making concession after concession trying to reach the people of the culture of the time. God does not start with an ideal and speaking condemnation toward us for not measuring up. God does not start where He wishes we were, condemning us for what we are not. God starts where we actually are, and then speaks hope while patiently and graciously loving us into becoming what we can be.

On top of all of this, you have to add the reality that these people God was working with had their own misconceptions of what a "god" should be. Not understanding what strength really is, if God showed up looking like Jesus, they would have seen this as weakness and followed after a different God instead, such as Baal, Dagon, Chemosh, Astarte, etc. Israel struggled with this enough as it was. God has to move them slowly to try to effect change without it being too much too fast, and losing them. It would be grossly unfair to define what we believe about God's ideals from this era of the scriptures. It would be fair to see in them how far God will go to meet us where we are. That is beautiful!

Now let's talk about *accommodations*. There are seven areas I want to quickly note that help us see how God sometimes accommodates where we are

at, *temporarily*. We'll take our time with the first, which will enable us to quickly understand the remaining six at a glance. This first one is the polygamy of the Old Testament. To be perfectly clear, God's ideal for marriage is revealed in the Genesis Narrative. But what happens when you find yourself in a culture that is extremely patriarchal and chauvinistic, where women are little more than property? This is evil, but you must slowly bring these people to see how evil it is so they themselves turn from this evil. But, add to this the fact that this culture is also very barbaric and war-mongering, and through the repeated violence of war, there are many more women than men. The only way for these women to survive in this culture is to be connected to a man (either a father or a husband). Yes, our ideal is that a marriage consists of only two people, but if something isn't done quickly and temporarily, mind you, countless women will be forced into slavery or prostitution to escape the poverty of begging. So, what do you do? Polygamy is evil, but do you allow it for a time, temporarily, knowing that even though it's not ideal, for the time being, it is the lesser of two evils?

This brings me to my point on accommodations. God is accommodating. Unlike ethical principles, which are always abstract, universal, and idealistic, God always perfectly tailors the ideals of the ideal to the complex uniqueness of each individual's non-ideal life situation in the present. We live out this image of God by following God's example by loving people where they are in the complexity and uniqueness of their non-ideal situations and without judgments. This is not relativizing morality. On the contrary, it is recognizing the difference between God's accommodating will and His ideal will. God's ideal will is what God wants, given a perfect situation. God's accommodating will is God's will, given the situation we are in, which is anything but perfect. We follow God's example in this when we hold the ideal, subservient to love. Morality is absolute, but only God can direct us to apply the ideal in a particular non-ideal situation.

We see God doing this over and over again in the Old Testament. Starting with polygamy (Exodus 21.10), slavery (Deuteronomy 23.15), Israel having a King (1

Samuel 8.22), the Nationalism of the Old Testament (verses “All People”), all the way to the Law itself, with all its punishments and rewards (Deuteronomy 28, see also the presentations on our Website entitled *Intrinsic or Imposed* and *No Longer Under The Law*. When we, as parents, lay down the law for our children we know that this is a way of relating to them that is only temporary and we hope they learn the lessons before they reach 18. As a side note, if you were to ask my nine-year-old to write my biography, it too would look a lot like the Old Testament. But if I were to ask her to rewrite my biography when she reaches 40, I’m quite sure she would paint a more complete picture of what I really am like as a person. Some might even say that I had changed between the two writings, when, in fact, it was not a change in me that took place, but a maturity that took place in my daughter who was writing. See also 1 Corinthians 13.9-10 and Hebrews 8.13).

The Patriarchy of the Old Testament is like this as well. Compare the Patriarchy of the Old Testament with Jesus’ treatment of women according to first century Jewish standards, and the result is breathtaking (See Luke 10.38-41, This passage challenges the role designations for women in the first century; the role of disciple and future minister of Jesus’ message is more critical than that of homemaker and hostess, and is also open to women. People normally sat on chairs or, at banquets, reclined on couches; but disciples sat at the feet of their teachers. Serious disciples were preparing to be teachers—a role not permitted to women. (The one notable exception in the second century was a learned rabbi’s daughter who had married another learned rabbi; but most rabbis rejected her opinions.) Mary’s posture and eagerness to absorb Jesus’ teaching at the expense of a more traditional womanly role (10:40) would have shocked most Jewish men and Jesus affirms Mary as belonging there (See also, Galatians 3.28).

Here is the point of it all.... Strip away all the concessions and accommodations of the God of the Old Testament, and you get a God who looks like Jesus.

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son [who is] the exact imprint of God's very being. Hebrews 1.1-3

We must be careful here. It would do us well to remember what happened when God, in the person of Jesus, showed up to His people in the past. They were so invested in the concessions and accommodations that when they ideal showed up, the difference was so stark and so intolerable, the cognitive dissonance was so great between what they believed God to be like and what He was really like, they could not take it, and they *crucified Him*.

...When you look at... the God of the Old Testament, you have to ask yourself, *is this a concession, an accommodation or is it God's ideal?* I'll give you a text that I believe gives us a hint.

But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land. Exodus 23.29-30

God's ideal for the Canaanites was not a violent loss of life, but simply relocation, with no loss of life. I don't know what happened between Exodus 23 and the time of Joshua, but I have to, at the very least, allow this to confront my deepest assumptions about the violence [or ethics in general] I see in the Old Testament. Again, strip away all the concessions and accommodations, and you get a God who looks like Jesus, who, rather than demanding the death of His enemies, allows them to put Him to death in an effort to actually save them.

You see, the early church saw these differences between [the God of the Old Testament] and Jesus. But rather than throwing out the concessions and

accommodations, they kept them, recognizing them for what they were and held Jesus to be their more complete standard of living. We must remember that the early church viewed everything in the scriptures now through the lens of the person of Jesus Christ. They were not called “Biblians” or “Scripturians,” but “Christians.” This should speak volumes to us today. How do you know when something in the scriptures is a concession, an accommodation, or the ideal? This is why the entire volume of the scriptures must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, everything from Genesis to Revelation must be studied in the light streaming from the Cross. If it doesn’t look like Jesus, then it’s not the *ideal*; we can assume it’s a concession or an accommodation of God, not showing us a complete picture of what God approves of or desires, but rather a beautiful picture of how far God is willing to go to meet us where we are at and patiently and lovingly grow us into people who look like Jesus, talk like Jesus, understand like Jesus, serve like Jesus, live like Jesus, and *love like Jesus*. The moral standard for a follower of Jesus is not the Old Testament, not even the ten rules that are the foundation and heart of the Old Testament. Rather, the standard of morality for the follower of Jesus is actually something which doesn’t contradict those ten rules but is infinitely more complete and full. It’s actually Jesus Himself. That’s why they are called “followers” of Jesus.

Let’s close... by looking at two words, a concept really that Paul uses over and over again in the New Testament. What are these two words? *Shadows* versus *Reality*.

These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ . . . is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. Colossians 2.17 & Hebrews 10.1 (See also Hebrews 8.5)

What is a shadow? It’s the absence of light. It’s darkness. But it’s darkness in the outline of its reality. It’s darkness in the shape of what it’s supposed to resemble.

It is not the reality itself, but simply darkness in the shape of the reality. Paul is brilliant here. This, I believe perfectly, illustrates exactly what the Old Testament is. God took the darkness of cultures He was trying to reach in the Old Testament and shaped them in such a way that we get an outline of Him, but not a clearly discernible or even always accurate picture. Shadows, although they tell us something of the reality, can, many times, be distorted, even misshaped. And how do we begin to see the difference between what is something's shadow and what is it really? We have to look at the reality itself. Take a sunflower, for example. The shadow may make us think the flower is actually taller than it really is? How do we know whether that is the case or not? We have to look at the actual flower. In the Old Testament, we see God taking the ugliness of the culture He was trying to reach and shaping into something that vaguely resembled Him. How do we know what in the "shadow" is a distortion and what is real? We have to have to look, actually, at God Himself! And where do we see God Himself, not in shadow form, but in reality? Where do we actually see God? In Jesus Christ.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. Colossians 2.9

Again, for the last time:

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways [polytropos – many forms] by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . . [who is] the exact representation [or image] of God's very being.
Hebrews 1.1-3*

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No one has ever seen God [even in the Old Testament], but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. John 1.18

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. John 14.9

...Again, when it comes to the pictures of God, including the violent ones, that we get from the Old Testament, we must ask ourselves, looking at those images of the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus Christ, whether those stories reveal an accurate representation of what God is really like or whether they are Divine concessions and accommodations. The authority for moral behavior for a follower of Jesus is actually Jesus! His commands, His teachings, His example. Followers of Jesus are called to view God as Jesus revealed Him and to think like Jesus, serve like Jesus, live like Jesus, love like Jesus, to be “Jesus” to the World around us. Something “better” than the Old Testament has arrived. It’s the person of Jesus Christ.

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* Adapted (shorted for readability) from this blog entry:
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