

Five Steps for Answering Any Tough Question

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EXAMPLE #2: VIOLENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

A second objection that I have encountered over the years concerns the violent passages in the Old Testament: “How can you believe in a God of love when he commands the Israelites to kill the Canaanites?” One atheist friend once put it even more bluntly: “Doesn’t the God of the Bible have a split personality: judgement in the Old Testament, love in the New Testament?”

SYMPATHISE

Whenever I’m asked this question, I always begin by acknowledging that the questioner has a point. There are many passages in the Old Testament, not least in the book of Joshua, which when I read I think “Gosh!”¹ If we haven’t wondered how all of this fits with Jesus’s command to “love your enemies”, perhaps we haven’t read carefully enough. So acknowledge the question—because it’s a good one!

HIDDEN ASSUMPTIONS

At the same time, I would want to ask my friend some questions as we explore this topic. For example: “Have you ever wondered if there are occasions when violence *is* permitted? What would those situations be?” If they are deeply committed to pacifism, we might ask why—where precisely does the idea that love is the supreme value come from? Again, if we live in a purely materialistic universe, where natural selection is the only game in town, isn’t the triumph of the strong over the weak all that matters? I wonder whether the very fact that we read the Old Testament and think “Ouch!” is a sign of how deeply Jesus’s values and ethics have seeped into our culture, no matter how secular we like to think we are.

APPLY THE BIBLE

I will sometimes say to friends who ask this question: “Did you know that the problem of God’s love and God’s judgement is actually raised asked by the Bible itself?” Scholars tell us that one of the earliest books of the Old Testament to be written was the book of Jonah and in it, there’s an amazing moment

¹ We Brits are masters of understatement.

where Jonah has a massive whinge about God’s character. God had sent him to preach to Jonah’s sworn enemies, the Assyrians, who proceed to repent of their evil and God then holds back from destroying them. This drives Jonah nuts and he yells at God:

“Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (Jonah 4:1-3).

In other words, Jonah thinks God—the *Old Testament God*—is too loving, too merciful, and too compassionate. What Jonah was struggling with was God’s *love* and God’s *judgement*. But the Bible doesn’t see these things as contradictory—rather God’s *judgement* flows out of his love. The opposite of “love” is not “judgement”; rather if I truly love somebody I will care deeply if they are wronged or oppressed. And that, says the Bible, is one of the reasons God acts in judgement—he loves the world he has made and when he sees injustice, evil, and violence, God will bring judgement.

Coming back to the book of Joshua, we see something similar in play: the Israelites were not asked to destroy a nation of vegan, kitten-hugging, pacifistic knitting enthusiasts. Rather from what we know of Canaanite society it was truly evil—one in which, for example, children would be burnt alive in the worship of the god Molech. But nor does God rush to judgement—earlier in the Old Testament,² God says to Abraham that he will grant the Canaanites four hundred years, but then the time will come for judgement.

What I’m aiming to do here is to help my friend to see the wider story, for context is crucial. Imagine you had never watched the original *Star Wars* movie and you walk into a room where a friend is playing it. You come in towards the end and the very first thing you see is Luke Skywalker firing his missile and destroying the Death Star. “What kind of story is this!” you protest. “This is *horrific!* That guy with the bad haircut and the wooden delivery is a monster! He just killed thousands of people!” What you’re missing is the *bigger picture*: the evil empire, the destruction the Death Star has wrought as it’s destroyed planets and innocent people. Locate the act of judgement within the bigger story, and it looks very different.

RETELL THE GOSPEL

As I read the Bible, I’m struck by the parallels between the Old Testament and New Testament—remember that your friend may not know that the Bible was written over a sweeping timeline of 1,500

² Genesis 15:12-16.

years. And one fascinating parallel is that in Hebrew, the names “Jesus” and “Joshua” are the same, with the same meaning: the Lord saves. So in both halves of the Bible, a guy with the same name goes to war against evil. Joshua’s war against evil was one that used the sword and warfare—and was a temporary victory. At best, it pointed forward to the need for a much greater battle to come. And in that much greater battle, Jesus warred against evil not with the sword but with self-sacrificial love. Jesus destroys evil once and for all by laying down power and allowing violence to do its worst to him. Even as he hung on the cross, he publicly forgave his enemies who had nailed him there.

And talk of enemies is sobering, isn’t it? Because as we ask questions about the Bible and especially the Old Testament, it’s easy to sit in judgement on it, assuming we are basically the good guys. But, I’ll say to my friend: “I wonder whether it’s struck you that the Bible doesn’t let us off the hook—but tells us that we are *all* God’s enemies because we’ve turned our backs on him. But thankfully the God of the Bible is, in Jesus, a God who loved his enemies and laid down his life for them—and offers, if we put our trust in him, to make us, his enemies, his friends.”

EQUIP YOUR FRIEND

As with the suffering question, the thoughts I have shared above have barely scratched the surface—there is so much more to say and many more questions your friend may have. So here are some resources I’ve found helpful to pass to friends who have raised this question. First a couple of books: Joshua Ryan Butler’s *The Skeletons in God’s Closet: The Mercy of Hell, the Surprise of Judgment, the Hope of Holy War* and David Lamb’s *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?.* Whilst for those who prefer watching to reading, the Solas *Short Answers* series has some helpful episodes on this topic—search for “Old Testament” at www.solas-cpc.org.