

## *The Holy One of Israel*

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I WAS ONCE ASKED IN AN INTERVIEW TO EXPLAIN SOME OF the characteristics that separate great preaching from mediocre preaching. Without going into all of the details of my response, probably the principle thing that should be said is that great preachers talk mostly about God and not about human problems. It is very easy for anybody to tell what is wrong with our world and what are the common struggles and sins of us human beings. We have only to look about us or to read the morning headlines. Even a twelve year old can compile a list of the evils in our society. But it takes a preacher to say what God is doing about them.

Great preaching talks mostly about God. In order to set the following discussions of specific difficult passages in their context, perhaps we need to say some things about God—about this Holy One of Israel, this Mighty One of Jacob, this Redeemer and Rock and Fortress and Father of his chosen people—before we move into specific problems.

Through the proclamations of Second Isaiah, we hear the following:

. . . my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways,  
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa 55:8–9)

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Thus we are warned to eschew every attempt to put God in the boxes of our prior stereotypes. We all have views of who and what the God of the Bible should be like. But “to whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One” (Isa 40:25). The God of the Bible comes to us as the Holy One, as the One who is totally other than anything or anyone in all creation. We cannot encompass his thoughts or capture his person in a comparison, nor can we predict his ways. Where we think justice should be meted out, we are surprised by incredible mercy. Where we believe surely there is reason for forgiveness, stern wrath is spoken instead. Our definitions of power become weakness, and our weaknesses are shown to be strength. Our estimates of wisdom are exposed as nothing but foolishness, while the foolishness of God’s actions becomes the only truth.

This God of the Old Testament—and of the New—does not conform to our expectations or consider himself bound by our pious definitions. In everything and all, he remains the Lord. And so we cannot judge the biblical witness to God or discard any part of it as unworthy of deity. We can only listen to the words of witness and learn of this incomparable Holy One.

Several things are certain, however. Everywhere throughout the biblical witness, the God of Israel wills life. The world he makes is a planet simply teeming with life. Every drop of pond water is filled with hundreds of microbes, every sky populated with a million birds. Roots thrust out until they burst through rock, and plants blossom out of dry ground. Creatures of every shape and form inhabit jungle and plain, bush and desert. Despite all its thorns and thistles, the earth gives its produce. The work of the Creator brings forth unimaginable life.

If we cannot read God’s will for life from the creation around us, then perhaps we can hear it from the biblical word. “I have no pleasure in the death of any one,” says the Lord God (Ezek 18:32). And so when killing and violence that come from our sin devastate human life, the Old Testament tells us that it grieves God “to his heart” (Gen 6:6). His plans

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for our future envision a realm in which “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb” (Isa 11:6) and “nations shall beat their swords into plowshares” (Isa 2:4), in which “they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid” (Mic 4:4).

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.  
(Ps 85:10–11)

Are those not the plans of God that we should remember when we read some difficult passage in the Bible? This Holy One of Israel wills that we have life. He works with us and with his creation to restore the fullness of life to all, that fullness that God created and that he intended from the beginning.

This God stands opposed, however, to all who would disrupt his plans, to all those who by human power would enslave or oppress the lives he has given, to all who would bend his just will and ignore his equity and make light of his righteous, lordly rule. The God of the Bible is a jealous God, a zealous God,<sup>1</sup> pressing on toward his good goal for his world. And he will not countenance the evil with which human beings want to distort and disrupt. God is “of purer eyes than to behold evil,” proclaims Habakkuk, and he “cannot look on wrong” (Hab 1:13). The Psalmist echoes that:

The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous,  
and his ears toward their cry.  
The face of the LORD is against evildoers,  
to cut off the remembrance of them from  
the earth. (Ps 34:15–16)

So it is that in Old Testament, and New, God destroys the wicked: fire and brimstone rain down on Sodom; the troops of an oppressing Pharaoh are drowned in the sea; proud nations are plucked up and wither; false prophets are slain. Even a faithless northern Israel goes into exile and disappears from history, and corrupted Judah loses her nationhood and

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languishes in Babylonian exile. The Lord, in Jeremiah, puts it in awful terms:

My heritage has become to me  
like a lion in the forest,  
she has lifted up her voice against me;  
therefore I hate her. (Jer 12:8)

The God of the Bible is a hater of evil.

We quail before such a witness, of course, because it turns upside down the assurance of Paul: “If God is for us, who is against us” (Rom 8:31). The awful reverse is, “If God is against us, who can be for us?” And the answer is, “No one.” That God can hate anyone goes against everything we have heard of him, and we soften the thought until God never despises anyone, nor does he ever bring any sort of judgment or wrath upon them. God only loves and forgives. Such is our modern conception of him.

Thus we become very much like Israel in the time of Hosea, when it reassured itself that God would always forgive it. Hosea quotes his people’s careless words:

Come, let us return to the LORD;  
for he has torn, that he may heal us;  
he has stricken, and he will bind us up.  
After two days he will revive us;  
on the third day he will raise us up,  
that we may live before him.  
Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD;  
his going forth is sure as the dawn;  
he will come to us as the showers,  
as the spring rains that water the earth. (Hos 6:1–3)

In similar fashion, Judah in Jeremiah’s time thought it could do anything and yet be saved. Jeremiah, in his famous Temple Sermon that is quoted by Jesus (Mark 11:17 and parallels), told Judah otherwise:

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Ba’al, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are delivered!”—only

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to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name become a den of robbers [i.e., a hiding place] in your eyes? (Jer 7:9–11)

In the second century A.D., a man named Marcion thought that God only loved. He declared that the God of the Old Testament was not the God of the New. The Old Testament, with its judging God, was to be discarded, he said. Only the Gospel according to Luke and the ten letters of Paul were to be kept. God was wholly a good God, who never judged anyone.

Tertullian, a writer of the early third century replied to Marcion:

What a prevaricator of truth is such a god! What a dissembler with his own decision! Afraid to condemn what he really condemns, afraid to hate what he does not love, permitting that to be done which he does not allow, choosing to indicate what he dislikes rather than deeply examine it! This will turn out an imaginary goodness.<sup>2</sup>

The true God is not otherwise fully good than as an enemy of evil, and the Bible from beginning to end declares that of him. Some of the passages that we stumble over in the Old Testament portray God as that enemy. And perhaps we shall never understand the judgment on us by the cross of Christ until we absorb that witness.

But how patient is this Holy One of Israel with our foolishness and follies! He is “very slow to anger,” proclaims the prophet Nahum (1:3), and how true that is in the biblical record! Indeed, the description of God as “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” is unfailingly found in Israel’s ancient creed (Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). God “remembers that we are dust” (Ps 103:14) and pities our helpless condition (cf. Amos 7:2, 5), and so time and again he withholds his judgment. He constantly sends saving “judges” to rescue an idolatrous Israel from its enemies. He patiently listens to the pleas of his prophets to spare his guilty people (cf. Exod 32:11–14; Deut 9:18–20, 25–27; Amos 7:3, 6). Time and again he “passes over” sin (cf. Rom 3:25) and uses human evil, despite

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his hatred of it, to further his good purpose (cf. the story of Joseph or of Solomon's accession to the throne). This God of the Old Testament is very slow to anger.

Perhaps the reason for this slowness to anger is that God wishes for us only good. "Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments," the Lord longingly tells Moses, "that it might go well with them and with their children for ever" (Deut 5:29). This Holy One of the Scriptures wants it to go well with us. He wants for us only good (cf. Mic 6:8a). If we absorb nothing else from the biblical witness, we should hear from hundreds of passages that God is good (e.g., Ps 25:8; 34:8). Thus even his commandments are designed only to do us good, to point us in the direction of life abundant, to give us guidance in the new life God grants instead of letting us wander aimlessly in the wilderness.

Because God is good, his judgments on his chosen folk are not about vengeance for wrong but are about correction that aims toward salvation, and this too we must remember when reading the Old Testament. God cannot give us new life without doing away with the old. Jesus puts that explicitly in the New Testament.

No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch tears away from the garment, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved. (Matt 9:16–17)

The northern kingdom of Israel is sent into exile to rid it of its idolatrous Baal worship and to give it new gifts of righteousness and faithfulness (Hos 2:16–20). There Israel will dwell many days "without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD." (Hos 3:4–5). In the same manner, Judah languishes in Babylonia until God can cleanse her from all her sin and give her a new heart and a new obedient spirit (Ezek 36:25–26), writing his law on her heart and entering into covenant with her once again (Jer 31:31–34).

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God works to change his elect into new creatures, using his judgments to do away with the old in order that the new people may be born.

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,” John the Baptist says of Jesus (John 1:29). And it is that “taking away” that governs God’s radical, judgmental cleansings of us. We die with Christ in baptism, writes Paul (Rom 6:1–4). The old life, by God’s judgments on it, is buried six feet under. But all in order that we may be raised to walk in newness of life.

So it is that the Holy One of Israel is finally the saving God. And that is solely because he is merciful and gracious, loving us with a love that will not let us go, despite the fact that we are undeserving. “How can I give you up, O Ephraim?” he sobs in Hosea 11:8. “How can I hand you over, O Israel?” At the core of the character of the God of the Bible is a persistent love for his children.

Is Ephraim my dear son?  
Is he my darling child?  
For as often as I speak against him,  
I do remember him still.  
Therefore my heart yearns for him;  
I will surely have mercy on him,  
says the LORD. (Jer 31:20)

The result is that every prophecy and narrative of judgment in the Old Testament leads finally to a “future and a hope,” to “plans for welfare and not for evil” (Jer 29:11). Indeed, the whole Old Testament story concerns God’s working to take our cursed and death-filled situation and to turn it all into blessing—such is the import of the beginning of the story in Gen 1–12 (esp. Gen 12:3). That the story finds its fulfillment in our sins borne on a cross and overcome in a resurrection is an ending that is consonant with all that has gone before.

The Old Testament witnesses to the same God to which the New Testament gives testimony. We must remember this when dealing with what we consider to be the Old Testament’s hard texts.

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*Notes*

1. The root word *qin'ah* is translated both as “jealous” and as “zealous” in the Old Testament. God’s jealousy is his zeal, his burning purpose to make his world good again.

2. *Tertullian against Marcion* 1.27, cf. 1.26–27; 2.12 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*; ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 1868; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:292, cf. 3:291–293; 3:307.