

God and Violence

There is much misunderstanding and misinformation about the instances in the Old Testament in particular in which we perceive the involvement of God in causing or condoning violence, or violent outcomes, where persons or the property of person are harmed. This can also be seen in the outcome of the tragedy in the book Esther, where Mordecai is authorised by Ahasuerus to instruct the Jews throughout the provinces to protect themselves by slaying their enemies when those enemies mount an attack.¹

The Western world today has a view that life is to be preserved or lengthened by all means, and that violence is to be avoided at all costs. However, we Westerners are hypocritical in our values in that, among other things we readily kill our own children by horrific means even before they have any chance to take breath. Medical science is such that if a person can just survive their first nine months they will live a long, medically prolonged, life. Yet the Western World has a popular view that the God of the Bible is a god of doom, death and destruction.

The general sentiment against which we speak is often termed in words such as; *How can God be moral when He causes or allows men to die or be harmed!* There are two general issues which we must address if we are to understand this element in Scripture: 1. The true nature of God; 2. The true nature of popular modern day ethical morality. It is the disparity of these two basic concepts in the mind of the objectors that causes this dissonance. We need to, as best we can, understand both.

Definitions. The key words used here have their ordinary meanings. In particular:

By *moral* we mean right conduct. By *ethics* we mean a rational understanding, that is, a philosophy of morality. By *true* we mean that which conforms to reality, that is, not subject to error. By *right* we mean that which is according to truth. This is written, like the Bible, in the male gender, meaning mankind.

Modern morality is dynamic in that it changes over time and from instance to instance. If we examine our attitude toward violence to persons we find that we do not hold the same values that people held in years or even decades past. Take for example the use of capital punishment in our society for serious crimes definitely committed. Our society no longer condones it. A century ago the death penalty was to be expected. This change is called 'progress toward enlightenment' by some people, but others are calling for capital punishment to be reinstated. Who is right? It reminds us of the days of the Judges when 'every man did that which was right in his own eyes².' The problem is that there is no absolute standard. Standards are relative to what people perceive to be true. This is why various magistrates sentence differently for similar crimes.

There is also the issue of our own individual double standards which modify our own views and actions. What we excuse in ourselves we condemn in others. We enjoy violence shown on TV, but protest it in the school ground.

Ancient Morality is easy for us to judge. We simply condemn them and move on. The people concerned are not here to protest. Life was much more simple then! Or was it? Actually, life was probably more basic, but no less difficult. In many cases people lived closer to the earth and the life forms it contains. Life, death and violence was close at hand.

If you wish to effectively evaluate the morality of the actions of people in the near or distant past it is necessary to understand the values and cultures of that time. As records go further back, our difficulty in understanding them generally increases proportionately. We cannot judge the moral actions of others without understanding, among other things, the ethical morality prevailing at the time. Nevertheless, their morality was also dynamic to a greater or lesser degree.

Human morality is a sand dune blown here and there by the changes of the time.

True Morality and the God of Truth.

To understand true morality we first need to understand a little of the nature of God.

Truth is an absolute attribute of God, and the righteousness of God is relative truth, or His truth in action. Because there are many gods in this world we refer to God (using the Capital G) as the one true God. If He is true and other gods are different to Him, then no other god is true, and they are by reason liable to error. Those who hold to other gods may not see it this way. If God is true, then by logic all that is of Him is also true.

Our problem is our view and perception of God. We are limited to our range of education and perception and our understanding of God is inadequate. God knows that man by his scant wisdom cannot know Him so as to understand Him. He has therefore revealed Himself. He has done this by interacting with His people in the past as the occasion demanded, and preeminently in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. And He has made all this available to us in subsequent ages by the writing and preservation of Scripture: no other set of writings is more ancient, more complete or more verifiably accurate. We can do no better in this regard than the systematic study of the Bible for the purpose of knowing and understanding the person and nature of God; and in our trying and testing, what we learn in the day to day issues of life. It is to the Bible that we turn, and not to the various philosophies of men.

God has revealed His nature as He has interacted with man. We perceive God in two ways: first, what God is by virtue of His being God; and second, what God is in relation to His works, i.e., His creation, including man.

We may set out these attributes of God which He has revealed, as recorded in Holy Scripture:

The Attributes of God³

Intrinsically and Intransitively,
that is in relation to Himself

Extrinsically and Transitively
or in relation to created beings

Spirituality

He is Life

He is Personality

Infinity

He is Self Existent

He is Immutable

He is One

Perfection

He is Truth

He is Love

He is Holy

Time and Space

Eternity

Immensity

Creation

Omnipresence

Omniscience

Omnipotence

Morality

Faithfulness

Mercy

Justice

What God is is wholly true and consistent in every part. He is at once the same in all aspects of His being. God has not divided Himself into attributes, this is a human aid to understanding derived from His revelation of Himself in His interaction with his creatures as recorded in Holy Scripture over time. These divisions are inadequate. We only consider them to help our understanding, not to define the being of God, for we cannot.

Consider. He is:
Absolute

Consistently He is

How We Experience Him

1. Life	'I am'. He always is.	That where I am there . . . ⁴
2. Personality	In Spiritual Substance	As He is so are we . . . ⁵
3. Self Existence	He has no life source	Whither shall I flee from Thy . . . ⁶
4. Immutable	Cannot improve/degrade	He is the same . . . ⁷
5. One	He is indivisible	That they may be One as We . . . ⁸
6. Truth	He is wholly dependable	He is faithful and will . . . ⁹
7. Love	He is always benevolent	Rich in mercy because of His love ¹⁰
8. Holy	He is consistently impartial	Be holy for I am Holy ¹¹

In considering our topic we are concerned with the truth, love and holiness of God in keeping with the indivisible whole. We are at once at loss to explain our concept of God and our understanding of God's actions. We must ask ourselves, which of these, our concepts, needs correction? The answer is, 'both'. God has stated His case in simple terms:

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," declares 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. Isaiah 55:8&9.

God said this in benevolence, not in indifference to the need of man.

Naturally (in the natural) we do not think or act like God does. It is our thinking that needs to be corrected when we find ourselves at variance with the words or actions of God.

Accordingly as we approach our topic of Violence and God, consider these following propositions:

1. Man is created in the image of God¹², that is morally. At his creation man is God-like in his attributes in the same way that God is in His attributes. This includes life. The life which Adam lost in his rebellion was the life-gift of God¹³, not his body life which continued on for another 930 years before his body life extinguished. The life men have on earth today is animal or body life. Spiritual death is the separation of the soul from God. Physical death is but the separation of the soul from the body.
2. Physical life is important to people, but it is important yet not essentially sacred to God.
3. God recognises the importance of a man's life and other freedoms to himself as a part of his self existence, an attribute of the created image of God, and has placed on them a value of right, which ought not be violated by others.
From (the hand of) every man, from (the hand of) every man's brother I will require the life of man. "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man. Genesis 9:5&6.
4. God has declared Himself to be holy, merciful and true, and we must assume this to be true.
5. God in His creation has given to man the right to choose, either good or evil, and this includes inflicting injury or hurt on, or the taking of the life of others.
6. God in His creation has given man the moral responsibility to act both justly and in mercy toward others, in accord with the image of God that he bears.
7. God has consistently declared that there is a penalty for culpable actions, or sin.
According to *their* deeds, so He will repay, Wrath to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies; To the coastlands He will make recompense. Isaiah 59:18

8. God has consistently declared that man is not able to bear the responsibility he carries by virtue of his creation in God's own image.
9. The rebellious and sinful actions of men tend to increase.
Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. Genesis 6:5.
10. God has consistently declared that he has and will place limits on the ability of men to engage in multiplied and continued sinfulness.
"Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him who hates Him, He will repay him to his face.
"Therefore, you shall keep the commandment and the statutes and the judgments which I am commanding you today, to do them. Deuteronomy 7:9-11.
11. These limits include the termination of the tenure of rebellious, sinful wicked people on earth. This is in terms of both individuals and collections of individuals as bands, clans or nations. World powers which expand fail in proportion to their sinfulness according to this rule.
"Then in the fourth generation they (the Israelites) will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." Genesis 15:16. (Note: It was the territory of the Amorite that God gave the Israelites by promise, and it was the Amorite in his clans that Israel was to dispossess in Numbers-Deuteronomy.)
12. God uses the processes of history, other men, other nations, persons in authority, natural events and direct Divine intervention as the agents of his bidding.
For example, of the pagan Cyrus He said: *It is I* who says of Cyrus, '*He is My shepherd!* Etc. Isaiah 44:28.

Some things for consideration.

1. Morals are often values-driven rather than morals regulating values. So when values change, morals often suffer.
2. Human moral values are consistently changing. We cannot judge the actions of others by the morals that men hold here and now.
3. God speaks to men and interacts with them in the language and culture of their day. If we are to understand those words and actions we must first understand their culture and values.
4. Each of us has a lenient view of our selves and our own, and a more severe view of others, to a greater or lesser degree.
5. We do well to learn to think God's thoughts after Him, rather than recasting Him in our own image, let us 'become partakers of the Divine nature'. 2 Peter 1:4.

Footnotes:

1. Esther 8:8 and following. 2. Judges 17:6 & 21:25. 3. Derived from *Systematic Theology*, Augustus Hopkins Strong. Pickering & Inglis, Ltd. London. 1958. 4. John 14:3. 5. 1 John 1:17. 6. Psalm 130:7. 7. Hebrews 13:8. 8. John 17:11. 9. 1 John 1:9. 10. Ephesians 2:4. 11. 1 Peter 1:15&16. 12. Genesis 1:26&27. 13. John 15:26&27. Bible quotations are from the NASB.