

Skeletons in the Cupboard

Some Problems in Old Testament Morality

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Sooner or later in any discussion of the Old Testament someone is bound to raise the question of the violence and cruelty, wars and massacres, not to mention much vigorous cursing of one's foes, which it contains, and seems to contain without rebuke, even with bland approval. The whole of humanity save for one family perished, it is claimed, in the Flood (Gn 6-9); the much-lauded Abraham was also, in fact, a deceitful man who tried to pass his wife off as his sister in the interests of his own safety (Gn 12.10ff); Jacob's matrimonial arrangements were unusual even by today's standards (Gn 29, 30); his daughter Dinah was no better than she ought to be (Gn 34); and his son Joseph participated in some distinctly "X Certificate" material (Gn 39). And all this without leaving the book of Genesis! Move on to the Psalms: agreed there are priceless things like Psalms 23, 46, 103 and many others, but you would hardly want Psalms 69 or 109 sung in church, would you — with the Gloria attached to them?

Yes, the Old Testament is like that, too, and these facts, along with many, many more have to be faced. Let us then fetch the skeletons out of the cupboard and take a clear and candid look at them.

Reporting and approving

Before we look at individual items and categories of items, a few comments of a more general nature will help us to a clearer view of the question before us. Firstly, it must be said that the Old Testament does not necessarily approve of all it reports even where it does not explicitly say so. It is not the nature of Old Testament narratives (the same applies to the Acts of the Apostles) to offer point by point moral or theological comment. The reader is usually left to draw the moral himself. Occasionally, of course comment

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is made. In the marvellously perceptive story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, the Old Testament perspective on such conduct is represented by Joseph himself: "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Gn 39.9). Equally we are in no doubt how matters stand in the David-Bathsheba affair: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Sa 11.27). But such comments are rare. In the case of Jacob and his many wives, while it is clear that he was living in terms of the legal norms of the world of his day, he was not living in terms of the norms of Genesis 2.18-25 and yet no hint of a rebuke is given. No hint? The Old Testament's view of polygamy is usually expressed by allowing us to see the sad effects it has on family life: cruel tensions between the husband and his wives, where one is favoured and the other not; debasing bargaining for the husband's affections;

We are very pleased to publish another article from the pen of Alec Motyer, Old Testament scholar, preacher, and former Principal of Trinity College, Bristol.



divisions caused by fond parental favours to some of the children and not others. The Old Testament does not really leave us in doubt that though it accommodates in its record the indulgences of men it does not admit them to its scheme of things.

Secondly, we ought to notice that this "questionable material" is not confined to the Old Testament but is biblical in its spread. Jesus thinks of His second coming as involving results on earth comparable to those of the worldwide Flood (Mt 24.37-39), for sheer callousness, the visitation on Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5. 1-11) could hardly be equalled. No curse in the psalms comes anywhere near matching the cool "let him be anathema" of Paul (Gal. 1.8) if for no other reason than that Paul utters it in the knowledge of the doctrine of eternal punishment, of which the Old Testament knows virtually nothing. If the reply should be suggested that the Old Testament contains this sort of material in greater quantity, the adequate reply is that it is also three times as long as the New Testament.

Again, we must beware of complaining about the factuality of the Old Testament. It is after all a book with a great deal of material recording the history of people in this world, and this world is a harsh and cruel place. Indeed, many of those who complain most loudly about apparently bloodthirsty material in the Old Testament would (one surmises) be the first to accuse it of unrealism were these things not recorded! But it is not really the facts that constitute the problem. As ever it is God who is the real problem!

A century of controversy between the Bible and "science" has limited our view of the doctrine of God the Creator. We tend to think of Him as the God who started all things off. But in the Old Testament this is only one of the four departments of activity of the Creator: He (a) began (b) maintains in existence (c) directs the operation of and (d) guides to their appointed conclusion *all things*. If this world were *our* world we would not find cruelties and suffering, accidents and catastrophes a problem — a nuisance, a pity but not a problem — for we would say "It stands to reason: this is what happens when people run things." If the world were a world of *total chance* we would not find these things a problem, we would rather come to expect them as a matter of the spin of the wheel. But it is *God's world*. He began it, maintains it in existence, directs all its events, leads all to His appointed end — and that is where the problem lies. How can such things happen in God's world?

It is in this light that we must try to look at some of the stories and sayings which cause offence. We make no pretence to be comprehensive or even to be aware of all the things in the Old Testament which have troubled sensitive spirits, but perhaps the following classification and brief examination will at least suggest a method of approach and, hopefully, may be able to show that there are two sides to every question.

1. Problems to be met in a spirit of faith

Many of the events which involve colossal suffering and loss of life are presented to us by the Old Testament as the well-merited judgements visited by a holy God after careful examination of all the facts. This is certainly the case with the Flood (see especially Gn 6.5-7), the overthrow of Sodom (Gn 18.20,21) and the fall of the Northern (2 Ki 17.7-23) and Southern (2 Ki 24. 3,4) Kingdoms. The Bible teaches that righteousness exalts a nation but sin brings reproach (cf. Pr. 14.34) and the question is, do we believe this? The Bible teaches the supreme seriousness of sin antagonising and inflaming the wrath of a holy God, inviting overthrow: do we believe this? To be sure we cannot be insensitive to the loss of life, the break up of home and family, the colossal weight of individual suffering. But here again the Bible has not kept it as a dark secret that these things are the inevitable outcome of sin. One of the greatest verses in the whole Bible was first spoken by Abraham: "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" (Gn. 18.25). This is a verse which calls for our faith.

The plague which followed David's numbering of the people, for example, is a problem which we must meet in a spirit of faith. What sin was involved in the holding of a census is not too clear to us but even a hard-headed customer like Joab was alert to the risks and would have put the king off if he could (2 Sa. 24.3). In the outcome, David speaks for all of us when, seeing the people perish in the plague, he cries out, "Lo, I have sinned and I have done perversely: but these are the sheep; what have they done?" What they had done we do not know, but according to verse 1 they had done plenty: "the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel." Faith looks to the judge of all the earth, confident that He does right.

The doyen of all problems under this heading is the command which Joshua received from the Lord to enter the land of Canaan and to kill off the whole of the existing population (e.g. Jos. 11.16-20). But before we decide that this is overstraining faith and demanding credulity, let us step back to the time of Abram and the original promise of the land. The land is promised but there is a "not yet" in the small print of the contract. Genesis 15.16: "In the fourth generation they shall come here again for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full." What a drawing back of the curtain from world-history! Were the Amorites ousted there and then injustice would be done; their sinfulness is accorded a four-generation probation — long enough surely for conscience to work if work it ever will. Then the divine prescience looks ahead and marks a date on the heavenly calendar: that is the point at which the harvest will be ripe for reaping and in the dovetailing of the ordered history of this distracted planet that is the date on which Joshua will be rapping at the doors. Again this does not gloss over the suffering, and the act of social surgery given to Joshua to perform remains horrific but faith has a firm foundation: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

2. Problems to be met in a spirit of sorrow

Amongst the problematical material of the Old Testament, there are, secondly, problems to be met in a spirit of sorrow, that is to say, cases where the mistakes of men implicate and smear the good name of the Lord. Outstanding here is 2 Sa. 21.1-14.

The story is quickly told. In keeping with the Old Testament view of things earthly calamities have spiritual causes. Thus, when famine strikes for three successive years, the mind of the Lord must be sought. The cause of the trouble is revealed to be Saul's breach of faith with the Gibeonites (v 1; cf. Jos. 9.1ff). This act of Saul's is not recorded, but it seemingly rankling in the hearts of Gibeon and well known to David too. At this point of the story, David made two cardinal errors in quick succession: first, he sought the advice of the Gibeonites as to how the crime could be expiated. It is an odd coincidence that it was in the case of the Gibeonites that Joshua also "took of their provisions but asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord" (Jos. 9.14). The Gibeonites requested the human sacrifice of seven of Saul's remaining family, and David made his second cardinal error: he granted their request (v 6). These were compound errors on David's part, concealing within them an impressive assembly of mistakes. Firstly, this was not the divinely revealed way of dealing with sin: David made no recourse to repentance; he sought no offering of sacrifice; he made no appeal to the Lord for forgiveness or guidance. Secondly David acted in violation of the mind of God: Gn. 22 was doubtless recorded chiefly as a testimony to the towering faith of Abraham and to the devotion to God which did not withhold even an only son (v 16), but the outcome of the story reveals the mind of God, that not even for the most praiseworthy and acceptable motives does he desire, look for or accept human sacrifice. Rather he has appointed a system of substitution (v 13) a matter subsequently prescribed for in the Law (Ex. 13.13). Thirdly, David broke the explicit command of God that "the fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers" (Dt. 24.16). And

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fourthly, David broke his own promise to Saul, when the already demented king made him "swear ... unto me by the Lord that you will not cut off my seed after me ... And David swore unto Saul" (1 Sa. 24.21,22).

Following on this sad catalogue of misjudgement, illogicality, disobedience and bad faith, it is hardly justifiable to turn with bland countenance to v 14 and deduce that the God of Israel was thought of as a Being who was placated by such atrocities! In fact not even the conjunction "after that" permits the conclusion that the earlier events promoted or caused the favourable outcome. Of the 49 occasions on which it is used, the vast majority (42) simply record a chronology: one thing following another in time. The remaining six (excluding the present case, of course, from both categories) do have a causal relation between the "before" and the "after" but this is in fact inherent in the events themselves, not in the connective word. We can only use this expression "after that" as a bare expression of sequence in time, and the question in the present case is this: is there biblical justification for concluding that the Lord's return to favour towards His people was caused by David's tragic mishandling of the situation? Manifestly there is not. Rather the context can only be translated v 14 "Afterwards ..." or even "But afterwards ...".

A similar case, also involving human sacrifice, which has been interpreted as indicating a willingness in the God of the Old Testament to accept such offerings is found in 2 Ki.

3. 26.27. The frequent interpretation suggests that the king of Moab, in desperation as the tide of battle went irretrievably against him, immolated his eldest son and that God was won over by this show of devotion to throw in His lot on the side of Moab and visit wrath on Israel. The sheer monstrosity of the suggestion should have been sufficient to make such interpreters back out of such a cul de sac and return to the main road!

The situation was that Israel, Judah and Edom had made common cause against Moab. The Moabite army was driven back to Kir-hareseth and the king decided to stake all on a last bid to break free. He concentrated his forces against the king of Edom, but when this failed, offered his son as a human sacrifice. Whose son? The English of the last sentence contains exactly the same uncertainty as the Hebrew of 2 Ki. 3.27. There is every reason to suppose that it was Edom's eldest son (presumably captured in the abortive sortie) who was thus sacrificed. This would indeed account for the fact that the hideous deed was performed on the wall where the watching king of Edom could be fully cognisant of it. The subsequent wrath against Israel was that of the disconsolate and outraged Edomites, turning in bitter anger against the prime mover of the war. The coalition broke up in disorder and the armies returned to base.

3. Problems to be met in a spirit of fear.

An emotion which we find very hard to tolerate is jealousy and we have understandable difficulties when we find the Old Testament using expressions like "a jealous God" (e.g. Ex. 20.5) or "the Lord, whose name is Jealous" (Ex. 34.14). But jealousy, horrid though it is in many of its manifestations as an aspect of selfishness and possessiveness, is a true aspect of love. Indeed love without jealousy is not true love at all, and it is one aspect of our blessedness that the Lord is jealous, jealous for the welfare of His people. Should any threaten us, therefore, there is an automatic reaction in Heaven (cf. Ze. 2.8), just as a person at once reacts if damage to his eye is likely. But, on the other side, the Lord is jealous for the whole devotion of His people, a devotion manifesting itself in true acknowledgement of His holiness and in obedience prompted by love. Where this is withheld or contradicted by irreverent or hostile behaviour, the wrath of the jealous God is kindled. There are incidents in the Old Testament, often classed as morally problematical, which fall into this category, and we should be concerned more to learn reverence and fear than to find cause for complaint.

There is something in us which leaps to resist such a story. We find this God (or this picture of God) repugnant.

We may consider, for example, the sequence of events centring on the Ark of the Covenant in 1 Sa. 5 and 6 and 2 Sa. 6. The Ark had been taken in battle (1 Sa. 4) and placed in the temple of Dagon at Ashdod. In consequence, the Lord not only played comic havoc with Dagon but also visited a plague of mice and some sort of skin eruption on the Philistines until they were driven in desperation to return the ark to its own land. Thus the ark came to Bethshemesh where it was greeted with joy and ceremony (5. 13-15), but the Bethshemites trespassed (cf. Nm. 4.5-15, 20) by "looking at, gazing on, inspecting" (v 19) the ark with the result that they are smitten by God with considerable (there is some doubt as to the exact number) fatality.

There is something in us which leaps to resist such a story. We find this God (or this picture of God) repugnant. This was not, however, the reaction of the men of Bethshemesh. They rather recognised the holiness of God and trembled before him (v 20). In this the men of old are our superiors and our teachers. For us, no less than for them and for the epistle to the Hebrews (10.31; 12.29) it is an awesome thing to fall into the hands of a living God who is a consuming fire. We need to re-learn the capacity to tremble in the presence of the divine holiness.

Do we want a God who stands by his people or deserts them when they need Him most? Do we want a God who sees to it that his work can go forward and His commissions be fulfilled or a God who is (like Baal, 1 Ki. 18.27) great and glorious but always somewhere else?

The story of the ark continues in 2 Sa. 6 where David undertakes to bring it out of obscurity and back to its central position in national life. His efforts were marked by disaster: Uzzah, who was in charge of the cart on which the ark was travelling, steadied the sacred burden with his hand and was struck down on the spot (v 7). Again, revulsion against such a God, or supposed God, fills our minds, but, again, this was not David's reaction: "And David was afraid of the Lord that day and said, How shall the ark of the Lord come unto me?" (v 9). Well might David have been "displeased" (v 8), for the whole blame rested on him. Placing the ark on a cart was a Philistine procedure! The Lord had commanded that the ark should be carried by means of carrying poles and had had it constructed with this in view (cf. Ex. 25.12-15; Nu. 4.5,15) so that no other form of transportation was permissible. The same references show how jealously the Lord guarded His holy things from all touching hands — those of the Levites who were charged with the portage no less than those of totally unauthorised and casual persons like Uzzah! But the wholly delightful thing about David was his openness towards God, his total readiness to repent, to learn better, to walk with his Lord and to covet His blessing. Consequently, when he learns that where the ark is, there is the blessing of God, he takes in hand again (2 Sa. 6.11,12) to bring the ark to the City of David. Now, however, it is carried in the required manner (v 13a; cf. 1 Ch. 15.15); David has been reading his Bible in the interim (1 Ch. 15.11-13)! And, aware of the holiness of God, he rests the whole enterprise on the efficacy of the blood of sacrifice to maintain sinners in the unrieved fellowship of the holy God (v 13b).

Probably the story of Elisha and the she-bears (2 Ki. 2: 23-25) has given more offence than any other single tale in the Old Testament. Yet it too belongs in the category of problems to be met in a spirit of fear. Properly understood it manifests the other side of the divine jealousy: the glorious reality of a God who does not leave his people in the lurch. Nevertheless it is easy to see why the story has caused a furore: an elderly, bald-headed man arrives at Bethel and by ill-luck, chances upon a group of mischievous children who mock his shining pate. With ill-nature, he pronounces a curse on them and, since his God is as ill-natured as himself, the curse is followed by some savage behaviour by two she-bears with 42 casualties among the children. Can such a story be rescued? Is it not intractably offensive?

But have we got the story right? First, Elisha was not an elderly man but a young man who had been second in command to Elijah. Second, we have no means of knowing that he was bald, and it is unlikely that those who mocked him could have known either, at a time when custom and climate kept the head covered (and all the more so, presumably, if it were a bald head!) Third, there is no necessity in the Hebrew to identify the mockers with toddlers and infants even though in a suitable context the expression in v 23 ("little children", RSV. "Small boys") could mean youngsters of the play-group age, or younger. Naaman's flesh, when he washed in Jordan, became "like the flesh of a little child", where we would most likely say "of a baby". Solomon, however, confessing to the Lord that he was as fit to rule as a "little child" clearly means any age below adult responsibility (1 Ki. 3.7). When Jonathan went to his secret shooting assignment with David he took a "little lad" with him (1 Sa. 20.35) and we would think of a junior servant in his household, possibly in his early teens. Hadad, at the time of his flight to Egypt (1 Ki. 11.17), was a "little child" but we get the impression from the story that he was much in charge of events and again a teen-age would suit. Taking the word "children" (RSV "boys") of v 23 by itself it is completely indeterminate as to age. It is used of Joseph (Gn. 37.2) aged 17, of the trained men of Abram's private army (Gn. 14.24), of Gideon's son whom his father thought capable of tackling Kings Zebah and Zalmunna (Jdg. 8.20). Joseph's sons are described by the same word (Gn. 48.16) yet they must have been in their teens at the time, and when one is described (48.19) as "younger" the same adjective is used as in 2 Ki. 2.23. The same conclusions are to be reached regarding the different word used in 2 Ki. 2.24. For example, it is used in 1 Ki. 12.8, 10,14 of Rehoboam and his contemporaries when we know from 1 Ki. 14.21 that Rehoboam was aged 41. In other words, both words are to be given the age-range most suited to their context, saving that the expression in v 23 requires the idea "those who are on the young side". In the light of this it seems very odd indeed that translators persist in using that English equivalent which, of all, is most guaranteed to give offence.

Let us, then, try to reconstruct the incident as it well may have been. Elisha has, for three days now, been chief prophet of the Lord in Israel. So far he has not ventured beyond the Jericho area from whence his master had been carried up to heaven. He must, however, make his way to Carmel which is to become the centre of his prophetic ministry (cf 2 Ki. 4.22-25) and his road leads via Bethel. This then becomes the scene for the first contact between the newly instituted prophet and the old established apostasy (1 Ki. 12.28-33). Whatever Elisha's feelings, it is clearly to be expected that the religious authorities cannot let the opportunity slip to cash in on the passing of the master and masterful Elijah; they will strike before the

"new man" has time to establish himself. A group of likely "young lads" is encouraged to become a "reception committee" to give Elisha a warm welcome and to see him off in style, so that henceforth he too will be abundantly aware that things are not what they used to be when Elijah was around.

The situation is somewhat crucial. The authority of the prophet in Israel is being questioned and the future of Elisha's ministry is at stake. Is he henceforth to exercise his ministry subserviently to Bethel and by their permission? Is he to live in perpetual doubt whether the requested double portion of Elijah's spirit is his (2.9) — and with a sneaking suspicion that it is not?

The cry of "bald head" is very puzzling. Of course, it may have been descriptively correct and a derisory way of letting Elisha know that the mob was on its way. On the other hand, it is worth pondering whether Elisha may have taken Nazirite vows (Nu. 6.1ff) and that this was a pointed and dismissive mockery of his consecration to his God as symbolised by the Nazirite locks flowing out from beneath his head-dress. We cannot yet know, but the possibility is there that he was being mocked in relation to his authority in Israel, to come and go as the Lord directed, his commission and endowment as a prophet, successor and heir to Elijah, and in his personal consecration to God. At any rate, most, even if not all, of this is called in question.

What then, is open to Elisha to do? Obviously, he could run for it, but that would concede victory to the priests of Bethel and neither Elisha nor his ministry (nor his God) could hope to recover from the blow. Less obviously — but at least theoretically — he could stay and make a fight of it, but that again, and much more painfully, leaves the victory with Bethel, for if, in the event, 42 of the assailants (v 24) were mauled (none, as far as we know, killed) then we will not be far wrong in assuming a total mob of three times that number. With these two possibilities, the human courses of action are exhausted. But, of course, Elisha could call on his God: that is what experience under Elijah would suggest; it is what Elijah would have done; it would let all see that the God of Elijah was still in business.

So Elisha calls on God, not on a "will He, won't He" hypothetical basis, but, confident in forthcoming aid, he pronounces a curse in the Lord's name, and his confidence was not misplaced.

Would we want it to be? Do we want a God who stands by His people or deserts them when they need Him most? Do we want a God who sees to it that his work can go forward and His commissions be fulfilled or a God who is (like Baal, 1 Ki. 18.27) great and glorious but always somewhere else? That is the real issue. To the believer it is the absence of the she-bears which would constitute the insoluble problem, a problem much, much too severe for faith ever to survive.