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# Old Testament God vs. New Testament Jesus

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**M**any Christians avoid the Old Testament. God seems so violent there, so heavy-handed compared with the gentle Jesus.

Others idealize it, putting a pretty face on events you would never let your children watch on video.

A few idolize it, claiming our lawless age needs a God who can split the heavens and rattle mountains!

In this article we will explore a fourth option—looking at the Old Testament as it *really* is. Admittedly the task is an impossible one, for we can never be sure whether we are idealizing or idolizing. Furthermore, one person's realism is another's idealism.

Nevertheless, taking the Old Testament seriously is worth a try. After all, it was the Bible of Jesus and the apostles. Even more, Jesus himself not only claimed the God of the Old Testament as his God and Father, he claimed to be the incarnation of that God: "Before Abraham was, I am," he said (John 8:59).<sup>1</sup> That testimony Christians accept.

If the two Testaments are inseparable, how far can we press the differences between them and still retain a sense of unity? Or is it even appropriate for Christians to address perceived "differences" between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New? Echoes of Malachi 3:6 ring in our ears: "I am the Lord, I change not" (KJV).

Both the Sermon on the Mount and the book of Hebrews are clear enough in this respect. In Matthew 5 Jesus repeatedly contrasts the old with the new: "You have heard it said, but I say ..." Yet Jesus is contrasting, not negating.

Similarly, the Epistle to the Hebrews claims Jesus is the "better" revelation. It's the point of the entire book, beginning with the first verse: "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" (Hebrews 1:1,2). Again, the "better" of Hebrews is a good/better comparison, not a worse/better contrast, an important difference.

In spite of lip service to the differences between the Testaments, the tendency to idealize troublesome elements in both is still a powerful one. Two anecdotes, both of which I mention in my book, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* illustrate the point.<sup>2</sup>

With reference to the New Testament, I remember a well-known Old Testament professor muttering that he was going to write a book entitled "The Unchristian Sayings of the New Testament." He was tired, he said good-naturedly, of hearing New Testament colleagues claim theirs as the Testament of kindness and love when it, too, reveals God's heavy hand. Jesus spoke of drowning a person in the sea with a millstone around the neck (Matthew 18:6); sudden judgment fell on Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11); Paul suggested handing a brother over to Satan for the

destruction of the flesh (1 Corinthians 5:5). Those are strong words.

The other incident, focusing on the Old Testament, happened in a college-level Hebrew class, which included several graduating theology majors. One of the exercises in our grammar book (when properly translated) read: "Samuel cut off the head of the king." Because the exercises were based on biblical passages, the students subconsciously heard the Bible as they worked. In this case, several brought in curiously mutilated translations. After we worked it through, one of them sheepishly admitted, "We thought that's what it said but didn't think Samuel would do such a thing."

We opened our English Bibles to 1 Samuel 15:33 and read in our mother tongue: "Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD." The picture of innocent little Samuel in the temple, well scrubbed and obedient, had buried Samuel's bloody sword.

In short, our challenge is this: What kind of framework allows us to integrate into a coherent whole the contrasting pictures of God: The Gentle God holding little children on his lap and The Violent One wielding a bloody sword? The contrast between the Testaments is a valid one, I believe, even though God's heavy hand still appears in the New. But regardless of whether we are dealing with the tension between the Testaments or with the contrast between God's gentle and heavy hand elsewhere, the same basic explanation applies, one that is closely bound up with the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

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## The Cosmic Struggle

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Evangelical Christians hope for a better and perfect world. But we are not there yet. The classic questions of theodicy arise when believers confess that God is good and all-powerful, but is master of a world such as ours. Are there limits to his power or to his goodness? That is the dilemma.

A free-will theodicy, known among Adventists in terms of "the great controversy between good and evil," is the one I find most compelling. It argues that free and uncoerced love is the ultimate good. Rebellion without threat of immediate extinction must be an option. Thus God temporarily *chooses* to limit the exercise of his power in order to ensure the ultimate good.

Such a theodicy argues the need for demonstrating to intelligent beings that goodness freely chosen is superior to enforced goodness. Indeed enforced goodness would be the ultimate evil, the antithesis of goodness, since it would require the arbitrary use of power by one being over another. The "great controversy," then, is the dramatic battle between good (reciprocal love, freely given and chosen) and evil (selfishness, a "goodness" enforced on another by the arbitrary use of power).

The book of Job is the classic biblical model for such a theodicy. A malevolent (selfish?) Satan confronts the benevolent (loving?) Deity with this question: Does Job really love God and the good for goodness' sake? God allows Satan limited access to Job. By enduring the test, Job vindicates both God and the good. God then exercises his power to bring Job's tribulations to an end, a judgment now *seen* to be just since both love and selfishness have had their day in court.

In this struggle, the role of authority is the key for understanding the tension between the gentle God and the violent one. What is the essence of authority:

power or goodness?

Because of sin, created beings view authority in terms of power, not goodness. Commands are issued, not invitations. Fear is the natural corollary and primary motivating force. By contrast, authority in a perfect world is defined in terms of goodness, not power. Joy is its natural corollary and primary motivating force. Invitations are issued, rather than commands. The response is natural and freely chosen, not because the authority can force compliance, but because it is *seen* to be good.

In Scripture, that ideal is described in the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31. Because the law is written on the heart, commands become unnecessary. "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jeremiah 31:34). Ellen White's description of heaven before Lucifer's rebellion reflects that ideal: "When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of."<sup>3</sup>

In the presence of sin, God is prepared to use authority as power. He will appeal to fear in an *emergency*. Sinai was a violent revelation because he could reach the people in no other way. Israel's slavemasters had exercised authority as power. It would take a long time before they could see it in terms of goodness. Jesus, the incarnation of God's law, illustrated authority as "goodness." But Israel at Sinai was not ready for such a revelation.

God still resorts to power and still motivates by fear. In a sinful world emergencies require it. But his ultimate goal is a kingdom where love reigns, freely and by choice. Scripture records the history of his efforts to that end.

Within this setting of the great struggle between good and evil, two pictorial models are helpful in organizing the biblical material. The "Toboggan" provides a historical perspective, the "Pyramid" a systematic one.

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## The Toboggan

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Though their implications have not always been grasped, the early chapters of Genesis vividly describe a world in the grasp of selfishness. As in the case of Job, God allows selfishness its day in court. The result is successive disasters: Eve's sin and Adam's, Cain's murder of Abel, Lamech's boast of greater violence than Cain's, the Flood, Noah's drunkenness, Babel. Joshua 24:2 notes that Abraham's own family "served other gods." Genesis reveals the shocking fact that child sacrifice and polygamy were "acceptable" within the family of faith.

Devout believers often overlook this "toboggan" slide into depravity, subconsciously putting a positive construction on the actions of God and his people. This "high road" approach to the Bible stresses the continuity of God's truth. Hebrews 11 is the classic example, transforming Old Testament sinners into New Testament saints. If you want to hear Sarah laugh cynically, go to Genesis. You won't hear it in Hebrews 11.

The Old Testament narratives themselves, however, suggest a "low road" approach, one that recognizes the effect of sin on God's perfect world. The "low road" shows how far creation fell from God and how patient God has been in drawing it back. He will be violent in order to reach violent people. But He patiently

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points toward the goal of a gentle kingdom of love.

The step-by-step loss of the knowledge of God demands a step-by-step growth back. Such a view not only allows, but requires, a means of recognizing different perceptions of truth. The "once-true-always-true" model cannot explain much of what we find in the Old Testament. The knowledge of truth "develops" under God's guidance. This is not natural evolution, but a pilgrimage led by God.

Such an approach also requires that we use "key texts" with greater care, for they are best understood in their historical context. But, if God spoke in time and place, how do we know what applies in our day? That is where the law pyramid provides a crucial organizing principle.

### The Pyramid

The tobogganlike effect of sin on human history often raises an unsettling question: Is all of Scripture suddenly on the "slippery slope"? No. The one principle of love, further defined by the two great commands (love to God, love to one another), and by the decalogue, provides a stable pyramid that never moves. Everything else in Scripture is commentary in time and place. The one, two, and ten form a pyramid that is more like a codebook; the rest of Scripture is more like a casebook.

The "toboggan" is unsettling because devout Christians tend to think of Scripture as codebook even while subconsciously treating it as casebook. "Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death" (Exodus 21:17). That is a command from God. Do we practice it? No. Then let us be honest and bring theory and practice into harmony. We will be stronger for it.

A casebook approach allows us

to integrate revelation, reason, and the work of the Spirit into a harmonious system. Revelation provides the concrete cases that reason evaluates. Prayer invites the Spirit to ensure that reason is guided by love not selfishness. All of Scripture remains normative in the sense that it provides concrete illustrations of God's dealings with people in times past. But the applicability of such illustrations to our day is neither self-evident nor absolute. I develop this approach more fully in *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*, a book targeted to the Adventist audience.<sup>4</sup>

### Summary and Conclusion

The cosmic struggle between good and evil provides a framework within which it is possible to understand why a gentle God must sometimes be violent. Given the radical differences between people and cultures, a God of consistent love, i.e. a God who does not change, must adapt that love in radical ways if indeed he is to be perceived by all as a God of love. Just as wise parents adapt to the differences in their children to make their love consistent, so God adapts his love to the understanding of the people he is attempting to reach. A recent article treating the differences between the genders put the matter succinctly: "Treating people the same is not equal treatment if they are not the same."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus allows us to see God in the flesh, a tantalizing and enduring revelation. He also spelled out the organizing principles (the two great commands) more clearly than they appear in the Old Testament. The Old Testament is more authoritarian. The cosmic struggle between good and evil explains why. This is also why codebook thinking is more dominant there, for in an authoritarian system one does not need to think; one obeys!

As we move towards the New Covenant ideal, a reciprocal love

relationship with God becomes increasingly important. That requires a thoughtful response. When the process is complete, God is no longer violent, even in emergencies, for there are no more emergencies.

To make his law of love secure, God wanted us to see the difference between selfishness and love before we make our ultimate choice. The Old Testament is an essential part of the drama. In the light of the New it makes very good sense. But I hope we never lose our sense of horror at what sin has caused. The picture of Samuel and Agag is a ghastly one and always will be. That's why I want to follow Jesus and live in a world where it won't happen any more, for everyone will have seen and made the choice to follow him and his law of love.

### NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (1989).

2. Alden Thompson, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* (Exeter, UK: Pater Noster Press, 1988; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), pp. 13, 21.

3. Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assoc., 1956), p. 109.

4. Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1991), esp. chapter 7, "God's Word: Casebook or Codebook?" (pp. 98-109); and chapter 8: "God's Law: The One, the Two, the Ten, the Many" (pp. 110-136).

5. Deborah Tannen, "Teachers' Classroom Strategies Should Recognize That Men and Women use Language Differently," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 19, 1991, p. B3.

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