

## The Challenge of the Old Testament

Readings: Psalm 119:89-112, Matthew 5:17-22, 38-48.

Sentence:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16.

Our theme this morning is the Challenge of the OT. This collection of 39 books written over a period of over a thousand years finishing about 400 years before Jesus was born presents a challenge simply because it belongs to a time and place very different to our own 21<sup>st</sup> century western culture. That alone can make it difficult for us to understand, though a good study bible or commentary can often explain some of the cultural background.

But this morning I want to look at a slightly different challenge. It's an argument often put forward by the so-called New Atheists. Richard Dawkins is probably the most well-known of them and he has some very scathing things to say about religion in general and the God of the OT in particular.

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”<sup>1</sup>

He calls him, among other things, jealous, petty, unjust, vindictive, in short, a “moral monster.” Now before you get too worried by this I should point out that even some of Dawkins' fellow atheists are embarrassed by his arguments and regard these criticisms as shallow and ill-informed. He is certainly very selective and chooses to ignore all the many verses that celebrate God's steadfast love, (Psalm 103:8-18) His loving kindness to His people and His desire that through them, through Abraham and his descendants, all the nations of the world should be blessed (Genesis 12:3).

But there's nothing new in Dawkins' criticisms. Some of you may have heard of Marcion. He was born around 100AD. His father was the Bishop of Sinope, a town on the Black Sea coast of what is now Turkey. Marcion became a wealthy ship owner and was also made a bishop, probably an assistant bishop to his father. But they had a falling out so Marcion took himself off to Rome. He arrived there around 140AD and rose to a position of influence in the church - probably related to the fact that he gave a large, a very large, sum of money to the local congregation. But Marcion had a problem. He felt there was a sharp difference between the God of the NT, the God of grace and love revealed by Jesus, and the God of the OT whom he saw as evil and vengeful, so he said the two were not the same. Marcion's solution was to throw out the whole of the OT along with any parts of the NT which didn't fit with what he believed. As you might expect it wasn't long before his ideas were rejected by other church leaders who gave him back his money and excommunicated him.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* page 31.

But Marcion, and to a certain extent Dawkins, raise an important question. Why should we, as Christians, bother with the OT? You may have heard people say something like:

“I only read the NT, I can’t get on with the OT and I don’t see why we need to read it now that Jesus has come.” May be you have said that yourself, or at least thought it.

Some of us are inclined to think a little bit like Marcion and see a sharp discontinuity between the OT and NT pictures of God. Maybe we think that the OT is all about the law - keeping the rules so we don’t make God angry, while the NT is all about grace and a God of love. We may not go as far as Marcion and reject the OT altogether but we can easily slip into a habit of ignoring the OT, or read only our favourite bits, like Psalm 23. We may choose to only read the NT, and the OT can be a challenge for us.

So this morning I want to look at some of the reasons why we should read the OT and, briefly, what we can say in reply to some of the accusations of people like Marcion and Dawkins.

First of all some reasons why we should read the OT.  
Let’s start by looking at the verse which is our sentence for today:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16.

The ‘all Scripture’ that Paul is talking about is what we call the OT, the NT as we know it didn’t exist at that time. Paul here is actually saying something really important about the OT, (it applies to the NT as well but here Paul is thinking of the OT). Paul says the OT is “God-breathed.” Often this is translated as ‘inspired’ but ‘God-breathed’ is a more accurate translation of the Greek word (*theopneustos*). Scripture that is ‘God-breathed’ has been breathed out by God and is the ‘product of God’s creative breath,’ as John Goldingay puts it. That’s a bit complicated but what it means is that just as we can say that the physical universe was created by God so we can also say that Scripture is also a product of God’s creative activity. That is, in part, what Ps 119:89-91 in our first reading is getting at:

“Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations; *you established the earth, and it endures. Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.*”

Now, that is not to say that the Bible was dictated by God in the same way that, according to Moslems, the Koran was dictated by Allah to Mohammed. God used many different human authors to communicate what He wanted to say. As Peter says: “... prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” 2 Peter 1:21. Nevertheless, the OT’s ultimate author is God - which is one pretty good reason for reading it.

Also, it is the Bible Jesus read. As a Jewish boy, Jesus would have gone to the synagogue school and would have been immersed in the Scriptures. Later on he makes good use of the Scriptures in His preaching and teaching. When He was

tempted by Satan in the wilderness Jesus answered by quoting from the OT book of Deuteronomy and a bit later he describes His ministry, what he has come to do, by reading from the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Lk 4:18-19.

We can't fully understand what is going on in the NT unless we know something about the OT as well. Let's look at a couple of examples.

In Acts 8 we find the story of Philip and a high-ranking Ethiopian court official. The Ethiopian was travelling in his chariot back to Ethiopia and was reading from the book of Isaiah (he would have been reading out loud because that's what everybody did in those days). Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading and the Ethiopian replied, “How can I unless someone explains it to me?” Don't we all feel like that sometimes about parts of the OT. Philip was able to begin with that passage and tell him the good news about Jesus. There is a long word that Bible scholars use to describe this: inter-textuality. It means that a text from one part of the Bible helps us to understand a verse or verses in another part. Often it is a two-way process so when Philip applied Isaiah 53 to Jesus two things happened: the life and work of Jesus is now understood in the light of the suffering Servant in Isaiah and the servant in Isaiah can be now be read in the light of Jesus. The Old and New Testaments throw light on one another and we miss so much if we neglect either one of them.

Let me give you another example. How many of you find Revelation, the last book in the Bible, easy to understand? How many find it difficult? Well, I do too, which is why I chose to do a course on it up at Laidlaw College in Auckland. Now, I am not saying I am now an expert on Revelation, by no means, though I do understand a bit more than I did before, but the thing that helped me most was finding out how much of Revelation is alluding to the OT, particularly Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah. In fact, if you take out all the OT echoes and allusions there isn't much left of Revelation. There was so much I hadn't seen before because I didn't know the OT well enough! If we want to understand the NT better it's a good idea to read the OT too.

Jesus himself gives us another example. In Luke 24 He unpacks the OT for the two friends travelling to Emmaus:

“Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.” Lk 24:27.

The OT is pointing forward to Jesus, it is only the first part of God's message to us, and is only completed with the coming of Jesus. Hebrews 1:1-4 says:

“The God who spoke at many times and in various ways in the past to the fathers by the prophets in these last days has spoken to us in a Son,” (that is of course Jesus).

God has spoken fully and finally in Jesus in a way that does not negate His speaking in the past, but that past can only fully be appreciated and understood in the light of the NT story of Jesus.

Let's have another look at that verse: "The God who spoke at many times and in various ways in the past to the fathers by the prophets in these last days has spoken to us in a Son." Note that it is the same God that is speaking through Jesus as spoke in the OT. So much for Marcion's idea of two different Gods. Marcion really didn't grasp the fact that the OT and NT are part of a continuous story of God's plans for us. When I was little we used to sing a children's hymn that began:

"God has given us a book full of stories, which was made for his people of old; it begins with the tale of a garden, and ends with a city of gold."

Nowadays some people like to describe it as God's big picture or as the drama of Scripture, like a 5 or 6 act play:

Act 1 Creation; Act 2 The Fall/Entry of Sin; Act 3 The Story of Israel in the OT; Act 4 The coming of Jesus; Act 5 The story of the Church (this is where we come into the on-going story) and then Act 6 The return of Jesus. It's all part of one story and we can't really understand one part if we don't know about the other parts.

Let's go back to the Marcion's challenge to the OT. Some of the things we read about in the OT need to be seen in the light of the NT. It can also help if we see the story, the 6 act drama, as a whole. When we are looking at a particular passage in the OT it helps if we recognize where we are in relation to the big picture. Are we looking at God's ideal for humanity in Genesis 1 and 2 or are we looking at God's recovery plan being worked out in the story of the people of Israel, where the situation is far from ideal. Sometimes what we are reading about is what is, not what ought to be – the Bible is very honest and portrays its heroes warts and all.

Sometimes, too, things only make sense if we put them in a bigger context. Some of the food laws concerning clean and unclean animals can seem very weird but it might help if we see them as part of God's desire for His people to be holy, to recognize that they had been set apart to serve God and couldn't get mixed up with the pagan people around them. Even in their every-day meals they were reminded of that.

Food laws are also a good example of the fact that some laws were appropriate to govern behaviour in one act of the drama of Scripture but do not necessarily apply in another. So in the NT Jesus can say that all foods are clean (Mark 7:19), a point reinforced by Peter's vision in Acts 10.

That is not to say that all of the OT Law can now be abolished. If we look at our second reading in Matthew 5, Jesus says He has come not to abolish the Law but to fulfil it, and the changes He makes actually extend the law in that they deal with our inner attitudes not just our outward actions. So there is both continuity with what has gone before, and discontinuity as Jesus brings something new and fresh, and as we move from the old covenant God made with Israel at Sinai to the new covenant or new testament that is open to all through the death of Jesus.

However, there are some issues particularly around violence and warfare that can make the OT an uncomfortable book to read. It is important to recognize that we don't always know the answers to some of the problems raised by some of the things we read in the OT. Some, such as the so-called ethnic cleansing of the Canaanites we can only understand in the light of God's ultimate goal to bless all nations through Abraham and his descendants, the big picture that we mentioned before.

We can only touch briefly on some of these problem issues this morning but if you want to follow it up one book I can recommend is Paul Copan's "Is God a moral monster? Making sense of the OT God."

We began this morning by looking at the way in which Marcion in the past and the new atheists in our own day have attacked the OT and its portrayal of God and have challenged us over why, as Christians, we don't stick to the NT and leave the OT alone. We have looked at some of the reasons why we do need to read the OT and we have talked a little bit about how to approach some of the questions and problems the OT poses for us. The OT is God-breathed, part of God's story of the outworking of His loving purposes for us, a story that we are now privileged to be part of. So in a way it's part of our story too. We are blessed to be members of a Church that recognizes the importance of the OT and to have an OT reading in our services nearly every week but let's also meet the challenge of the OT and try to include the OT in our own personal reading as well.

#### Prayer

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Challenge: Plan to start reading some of the OT. Psalms is a good place to start unless you want to go right back to the beginning and start with Genesis.

#### Some helpful books:

Paul Copan *Is God a Moral Monster: Making Sense of the Old Testament God*. (Available as an ebook)

David T. Lamb *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* (Available as an ebook)

Chris Wright *The God I Don't Understand*. (Available as an ebook)

Vaughn Roberts *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible*. (Available at BTC library)

Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*. (Available at BTC library)