

Hey Preacher! Sermon Series
Why Does God Act Differently in the OT and NT?
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“Who made God?” That was the question the precious four-year-old girl asked me after church. I get that question a lot, mainly from little kids. “Who made God?” she said, then quickly added, “I asked my dad and he told me to ask you.” Thanks, Dad. So I put on my best thinking face, waiting a few seconds, and gave her the best answer I knew: “You should ask Rev. Trish!”

“Who made God?” is not only a kids’ question, is it? I bet you’d like to know the answer. I know I would. In fact, I have a LOT of questions about God to which I’d like to know the answer. And you would think that the best source of answers to questions like that would be the Bible. But I think when it comes to knowing God, sometimes the Bible raises more questions than it does offer answers. During our summer sermon series called “Hey Preacher!” we’ve been addressing some of those questions. Today’s question is about why God seems to act so differently in different parts of the Bible. Here’s the short answer: There’s more than one God in the Bible.

Now, don’t worry, we’re not going to set up a pagan altar in the sanctuary and start animal sacrifices to Zeus and Anubis or Zuul the Gatekeeper. We still believe in the one God, who the Jews call Yahweh, and we believe God was definitively revealed to us through Jesus Christ. We’re still monotheistic. But we also have to reconcile that belief with all the ways the Bible presents God to us, sometimes in ways that directly conflict each other. Remember the old game show “To Tell the Truth?” Three people would pretend to be someone, and the panelists had to guess which one was really that person. And the host would say, “Would the real Jane Smith please stand up?” Today, I would like to ask, in the midst of all the ways God is portrayed in scripture, “Would the real God please stand up?”

If you think I’m off my rocker here, it won’t take you long to see what I’m talking about. In fact, only 27 verses into the Bible, we have our first conundrum, when God says while creating humans. “Let us make humankind in our image.” Who is this “us”? Some argue the passage is referring to the Trinity of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. That’s one theory, but the original writers of this scripture knew nothing about Jesus Christ, and had a much different understanding of how God’s Spirit worked. It’s tempting to read into the text something we want to see there, but that distorts the original writers’ purpose. So who’s “us”?

We can get a clue from the Psalms. Psalm 82 says, “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment.” In this psalm, we have the Israelite God presiding over and placing judgment upon the other gods in the divine council. In other Bible passages, God’s power and sovereignty is asserted over the gods of the surrounding nations. The Israelites lived in a world where multiple gods were a given. Each nation had their fair share of gods, and there were even household gods, usually represented by carvings or statues. There was no question about whether or not these gods actually existed; of course they did! But Yahweh was greater than all of them.

This is one example of the fact that what we learn about God in the Bible is filtered through the authors and the culture in which they lived. The authors could only write what they knew, and for many of them, the existence of multiple gods was assumed. This understanding is pivotal for us as we try to make sense of the different ways we see God portrayed in the Bible.

The Bible is as much a word about God as it is the word of God, and that word comes to us through the imagination of the authors.

Biblical scholar Peter Enns puts it this way: “The God we meet in the Bible sometimes knows everything, and at other times seems stumped and trying to figure things out. God is either set in God’s ways and in full control or changes God’s mind when pressed. God gives one law in one place then somewhere else lays down another law requiring something else. Sometimes God is overflowing with compassion and at other times has a hair-trigger temper.” And that’s not to mention things like Sophia, the feminine characterization of God in Proverbs. All of these representations of God are in the Bible, as written by the human authors.

This perspective can be helpful for us in dealing with what I think is one of the most difficult challenges of the Bible, and that is the violence we read there. Let’s take one example we find in Deuteronomy: “But as for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God.”

Think that’s bad? Here’s one that’s even worse. King David wanted to do a census, so he does it, but without consulting God first. God gets angry and sends a pestilence on Israel. Seventy thousand people die. As it reads in the Bible, God kills 70,000 of God’s own people because God was angry that David took a census.

Right there is one of the main reasons people give up the faith or never even give it a try. Why would I want to worship a capricious God who commands people to commit genocide or who kills God’s own people? Unfortunately, we’ve seen through history Christians who’ve taken this as a mandate to wipe out non-believers, from the Crusades to Hitler. So how do we reconcile this God with the God of love and mercy we meet in other parts of the scriptures? Would the real God please stand up?

I don’t believe God commanded the Israelites to kill all those people. I just don’t. That’s not the God I worship or have come to know through Jesus Christ. I actually think this passage tells us more about the people writing it than it does about God. The Israelites existed in a tribal culture, in which taking land and defeating enemies with the blessings of the gods was commonplace. If you won a battle, it was God’s will. If you lost a battle, you were being punished by God. If the flu broke out in your tribe and a bunch of people died, then you must have somehow angered God to cause this punishment. Back in the days before medicine and science and meteorology, God got the credit for good things and the blame for bad things.

I don’t believe God commanded the Israelites to do those things. I just think they said God did as a way of making sense of it. I don’t believe God killed people for David taking a census. I believe a disease swept through the Israelites, and the only way they knew to explain it was God’s wrath. The authors of the Bible wrote what they knew, and so they portrayed God as a warrior who led them into battle and punished them when they did wrong.

That understanding of God evolved as culture evolved, so we see in the Bible an evolution in the relationship between God and God’s people. At times God seems like a grumpy father around whom they have to tiptoe; at other times, God is a merciful judge who encourages Jonah to speak a saving word to the enemy so that they will repent; and at other times, God is a rock and rescuer during times of hardship.

We have to realize that the Bible wasn’t written as these things happened. In most cases, it was written as many as hundreds of years afterward. So the biblical writers tell these stories in

a way that explains who God is to them and why these things happened. How do you picture God right now? An old man with a long beard and flowing robe? A king with a scepter and crown? Morgan Freeman? A source of light with no bodily features? However you picture God, that's how you will write about God. That's what the biblical authors did.

As Christians, we've had what we believe to be the definitive revelation of God in the form of Jesus Christ. As we put our faith in him, we can leave behind the other images of God we've been presented that give us trouble, and we can filter all we know and believe about God through Jesus. But we also have to realize that Jesus' story is told four different ways and they don't always agree. So even our picture of Jesus is a little blurry as it gets complicated by images of Jesus welcoming children and violently turning over tables, blessing women and cursing the Pharisees, teaching parables and crying out for help.

Ultimately, we have to know God for ourselves. No one else can tell us who God is for us. We can know God using a variety of sources: the Bible, our brains, what we've been taught, and our own experiences of God in our lives. Using these, we can each determine who God is for us, and then live out that interpretation in our daily lives. We can also use that to rule out other images of God that don't fit. For example, if we believe God is peaceful, then we can rule out images of God that are violent or vengeful.

And finally, we have to admit that no matter how much reading and praying and studying we do, we can never fully know God. God is so much greater than we can imagine, and so much more than the biblical writers can capture. I don't believe God changes, but I believe our concept and understanding of and relationship with God does change. I wish this weren't so complicated, but if faith were easy, everyone would have it. We have to do the hard work of getting to know God as best we can, realizing that we can only do so in part. Someday, scripture promises us, we will fully know. Until then, may we believe that even if we don't fully know God, God fully knows us, from the moment we are born to the moment we leave this earth. And along the way, we'll know God in many different ways, each speaking to us a word of hope and comfort. But ultimately, what matters most is that God loves us. And really, that's all we need to know.