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Is God Permissive, Wrathful, or Both?

Elizabeth Preysner

From the Old to the New Testament, God is portrayed as permissive and wrathful. Jews avoid this contradiction, as they only accept the God of the Old Testament as truly divine. For Christians, however, this is complicated because the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament act in drastically different manners. The God of the Old Testament is perpetually forgiving of the sins of His chosen people, the Israelites, although they often stray from His laws. Jesus, in contrast, preaches God's eternal damnation for those who do not follow what is laid out in the Bible. This can be shocking to Christians who are accustomed to seeing Jesus portrayed as a healer and miracle worker. This stereotype does not address Jesus' message of judgment. While reading the New Testament, it was surprising to discover that the God of the New Testament is harsher than the God of the Old Testament. Jesus performs good works on Earth, but He also warns of eternal damnation for those who sin. God, according to Jesus, is not going to be benevolent, He is going to judge the nations and punish the wicked.

These conflicting views of God are illustrated in a comparison of Psalm 106 (Old Testament) and Matthew 25 (New Testament). Psalm 106 describes God as a guardian who continually comes to the aid of His chosen and upholds His covenant with Israel. In contrast, Matthew 25 depicts God as an authority figure who demands faithfulness to assure redemption on Judgment Day. These differing views of God make it difficult for those trying to follow Him to truly understand His nature. One could dismiss Jesus as the Son of God and only accept the vision of God presented in the Old Testament. This perspective, however, does not address how Jesus' message relates to God. Early Christians had to struggle to reconcile these various perspectives of God. This led to the development of different sects of early Christianity.

In the Old Testament, God is the protector of the Israelites. He rescues them from oppression and invasion. Psalm 106 recalls what God has done for Israel saying, "...he saved them for his name's sake..." (Ps. 106.8). God rescues the Israelites from slavery and protects them as they flee from Egypt. He hears their cries of misery and comes to liberate them. The narrator recounts God's deliverance of Israel stating, "He rebuked the Red Sea and it became dry; he led them through the deep..." (Ps. 106.9). The history of the Israelites is the history of the protection and benevolence of God. He not only rescues them from Egypt and gives them a Promised Land to inhabit; He defends them against their enemies. God's protection does not fail. He does not abandon the Israelites, even when they sin against Him.

Psalm 106 begins by extolling God for His eternal goodness and love saying, "Praise the Lord! O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever" (1). Regardless of the actions of the Israelites, God continues to love and forgive them. His love is boundless; even the most egregious actions on the part of the Israelites do not cause Him to turn His back. The Israelites sin, God forgives them, they neglect to follow His ways, and sin again. This pattern occurs throughout the history of Israel. After God rescues the Israelites from Egypt for example, "...they soon forgot his works; they did not wait for his counsel" (Ps. 106.13). Once God rescues the Israelites and everything is going well, they disregard God. The Israelites only call on God when they need His help.

God, however, does not chastise the Israelites for their wrongs, even when they break His commandments. The Israelites, "...exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox...they forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt..." (Ps. 106.20-21). Neither does

God punish the Israelites for their sins against His commandments. God does become angry and vows to destroy them; however just as He is ready to let His wrath loose, a prophet intercedes. In this instance, the holiness of Moses convinces God to save the Israelites. God, in the Old Testament, is therefore permissive. He allows the Israelites to sin without consequences for their unholy actions.

When the Israelites are wandering in the desert, they "...grumbled in their tents, and did not obey the voice of the Lord" (Ps. 106.25). Even this sacrilege is not enough to merit the full wrath of God. Once again God becomes angry, but He does not fulfill His threats. The Israelites continually disobey God and break His commandments; however God comes to their aid in times of trouble. Throughout the history of Israel, God "...delivered them, but they were rebellious in their purposes..." (Ps. 106.43). This lack of punishment and continual aid renders adherence to the Ten Commandments pointless. If God will favor the Israelites regardless of their actions, then they have no initiative to uphold His laws. Just as children will not obey rules without punishments, the Israelites will not obey the laws without a punishment from God. They know they are the chosen people and that God will not abandon them. This special status gives them the ability to disregard God and still benefit from His goodness. The Israelites have no motivation for obeying them, for "...he regarded their distress when he heard their cry...he remembered his covenant, and showed compassion..." (Ps. 106.44-45). The Israelites may not uphold the covenant they made with God, but God does not break His promises. This, however, results in the one-sided relationship between God and the Israelites. They continually cry out for help, and God comes to their rescue. This relationship is altered in the New Testament. There, God requires faith and trust in Him before He gives aid.

In other parts of the Old Testament besides the Psalms, God's faithfulness to His people requires the same type of commitment necessary for salvation in the New Testament. Deuteronomy 28, for example, lists a string of curses that will befall those who do not follow God's commandments, for "...if you do not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing his commandments...the Lord will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration..." (Deut. 28.15). Here, God promises physical catastrophe to those who turn away from His commands. God is promising earthly destruction, which can be replaced by His blessing if one realizes the error of his ways. In the New Testament, there is no hope for God's forgiveness on Judgment Day for those who disregard His commands.

In contrast with Psalm 106, Matthew 25 presents this harsher view of God. This view of not unique to verse 25; it is exhibited throughout the entire gospel of Matthew which looks at the afterlife. The gospels of Mark and Luke, in contrast, do not focus so intensely on the apocalypse. The reason for Matthew's focus may derive from the fact that Matthew's audience appears to be Jewish and thus under the assumption that they are the chosen people of God (Ehrman 119).

The gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, establishing Him as descending from the house of David. This confirms that Jesus has the proper lineage to be the Jewish Messiah (Ehrman 103). Throughout Matthew, various fulfillment citations are used to link Jesus to the prophets of the Old Testament (Ehrman 105). Since Matthew's Jewish audience would have considered themselves God's chosen people, Matthew must continually remind them that since Jesus' coming they are no longer unique. God is coming in His full glory to judge everyone, Jews and Christians alike, on Judgment Day. Unlike the Israelites of the Old Testament, God will not come to the aid of those who do not follow His laws and live their lives according to His decrees. The harsh condemnation of those who do not accept Jesus is evident

throughout Matthew, beginning with the message of John the Baptist. He warns, “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’ for I tell you...every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matt. 3.8-10). Even before John the Baptist told the Jews in Matthew that they are not saved by virtue of their covenant with God, Matthew’s emphasis on God’s wrath showed Matthew’s Jewish audience that God is no longer going to continue the permissive behavior exhibited in the Old Testament. Matthew 25 in particular presents a God who will save those who follow Him and damn those who do not.

Matthew 25 tells of a God who ensures His followers adhere to His commands by promising to return, unannounced, in the future. Those who follow God must be sure they are living a pure life, for God could return at any time. Jesus illustrates this in the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, an allegory for His second coming. When those bridesmaids who were not ready for the bridegroom ask to enter the house, the bridegroom replies, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you. Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matt. 25.12-13). When God returns, those who have not lived holy lives will be denied entry into the house of God. They did not live their lives in fear of God and He will not accept them now. No amount of supplication for mercy will allow those who have not lived their life according to God’s commands to enter into His new kingdom. Jesus tells of a God who has no chosen people but expects each person to earn His blessing by virtue of their good works. The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is absent from the other Synoptic Gospels, emphasizing Matthew’s focus on a God that demands strict obedience to His commands in order to gain salvation.

In Matthew’s account, Jesus preaches that God expects His followers to use the gifts He has given them to glorify His name and grow spiritually. Those who do not will suffer eternal damnation. In the parable of the Talents, Jesus tells the story of a man who entrusted varying amounts of money to his slaves. The first two slaves used what they were given and doubled their original investment. The third slave hid his money in a hole. When their master returned, he praised the slaves who had made good use of their money, but chastised the slave who did not make use of his talent. In anger the master decrees, “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25.30). The gospel of Matthew contains the bleakest conclusion to this parable. In the gospel of Mark, the parable of the Talents is significantly shorter and concludes with the recommendation to be ready for Christ’s coming. Punishment is not mentioned. The gospel of Luke concludes with the admonishment that those who reject Jesus will be killed. Although in Luke a punishment occurs for rejecting Jesus, it is finite: death. Only the gospel of Matthew mentions eternal damnation as a consequence of rejecting Jesus.

As illustrated in the parable of the Talents, God has given gifts to each person so that they may use them to glorify His kingdom and escape eternal damnation. If, like the third slave, a person does not use what God has given, they will be subject to punishment and eternal damnation. This is a significant change from the permissive God of the Old Testament. There, God was willing to forgive the Israelites for all their sins. The Old Testament Israelites did not need to use their talents productively, for they already had the promise of forgiveness. Jesus warns against this in the parable of the Talents by illustrating the consequence for misusing God’s gifts. Those who strive to glorify God will “...enter into the joy of [their] master” (Matt. 25.23). All others are doomed.

On Judgment Day, “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...” (Matt. 25.32). Each individual is held responsible for his or her actions; a righteous person cannot hope to save

one who has disobeyed the demands of God. No nation, including Israel, is exempted from judgment. This judgment is likened to the bucolic image of a shepherd separating sheep from goats. This is metaphorical for Jesus sorting the people of the world on Judgment Day and separating the righteous from the wicked. In other parts of the New Testament, Jesus is described as the Good Shepherd. On Judgment Day, Jesus will shepherd into His kingdom only those who are good.

These two views of God create a dichotomy. How can God be both forgiving and judgmental at the same time? Was Jesus truly the Son of God and telling the truth about Him? In the Roman world, both Jews and Christians had to work to reconcile these issues. As illustrated in the gospel of Matthew, Jews were confronted with a Messiah who revoked their privileged status as the people of God. They were now faced with the new concept of a salvation that must be earned.

Jews and Christians each had a different manner of reconciling the God of the Old Testament with the God described by Jesus in the New Testament. Jews maintained their status as the chosen people of God by rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. Christians developed various sects of early Christianity, viewing God as only one of many gods to seeing Him as the true Son of God. The goal of each perspective, however, was to establish the nature of God. Some, like the Marcionites, resolved the problem by rejecting the God of the Old Testament and stating that Jesus came to save humanity from this God (Ehrman 5). By doing so, the Marcionites avoided the need to reconcile the two characters of God. Another group, the Jewish-Christian adoptionists, held that Jesus was the adopted Son of God, making Him a mortal (Ehrman 3). Therefore, there was only one God, the God of the Old Testament. Perhaps the most complicated attempt to reconcile the two Gods was that of the proto-orthodox Christians. They believed that Jesus was the true, divine Son of God and that God and Jesus were one (Ehrman 7). This explanation, however, requires one to struggle with the contradictions between Jesus' teachings and the actions of God.

In the Old Testament, God may destroy cities or send plagues, but He comes to the aid of His chosen people. The Israelites may sin, but God will come to their rescue. In the New Testament, Jesus is generally considered loving and kind. He does perform miracles and help others in the Gospels, however, He also warns of the coming Kingdom of God where He will not be so benevolent. The punitive message of Jesus is often overlooked by Christians, leading to the misconception that the God of the Old Testament is harsh while the New Testament Jesus is compassionate. The God of the Old Testament may be harsh, but He does not condemn sinners for eternity. Since the God of the New Testament does, Christians must live their lives with strict adherence to the Bible. Jews, as God's chosen people, do not need to constantly strive for salvation. Their deliverance is already guaranteed. These two portrayals of God present opposing views of His character and reinforce the existence of two separate religions. God cannot be eternally forgiving and eternally damning at the same time, yet the God of the Bible appears to be so. Yet, both history and tradition indicate that the two religions, Christianity and Judaism, will not reconcile.

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