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Luke 19:27 16, ESV.

27 “But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me.”

The same God?

I recently talked to a young man who had not been raised in any faith but had read the Bible straight through on his own. On impulse, he had signed up for an online reminder and schedule provided by a Christian website that guided him through the Bible in one year – and he stuck to it. I could tell that he had good reading comprehension and that he had Googled a lot while looking for explanations of passages: he had a very good understanding of what was in the Bible. He had even read parts of online commentaries. He said that he had one big question for me, as a reverend: Christians claim that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. He didn't understand this because in the Old Testament, God is violent and vindictive – and so are his so-called “Chosen” People. But in the New Testament, he said, Jesus, who is supposed to be God, is preaching non-violence, peace and love, and total forgiveness. Yes, he said, sin sometimes

gets brutally punished in the New Testament, but all in all, the two Gods, the Old one and the New one, seem to be very different characters to him. I'd like to walk you through how I answered the question for him.

Here is the short answer, though: this distinction between the Old and the New Testaments is exaggerated by people to a degree, and yes, it's the same God. But there is a difference in the mission of God in the two Testaments.

In the Old Testament God uses violence to destroy evil. When the Pharaoh will not let his people go free, we read this:

²⁹ At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. ³⁰ And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians. And there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where someone was not dead. ³¹ Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, "Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. ³² Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!"

To the modern reader, we question why God would kill children and make innocent families suffer. But remember that the Exodus probably did not happen historically the way it is depicted in this faith story. There is strong archeological, literary, and scientific evidence to counter the biblical description of the movement of the Hebrew people from Egypt to Canaan. It's also true that much of the Hebrew Scriptures were heavily rewritten, probably multiple times, long after they were

originally crafted. We thus read the brutal story of the killing of Egyptian innocents and the subsequent massacre of the Canaanites as a faith story not rooted in historical fact and serving to symbolically illustrate God's dedication to the Chosen People. We see God honoring the promise of a land of their own – and importantly, this is in direct response to the Israelites remaining loyal to the one, true God.

Similarly, God uses violence, in the form of foreign armies to punish and redirect his people when they are wayward and start worshipping pagan gods. This is from Deuteronomy 6:

¹³ It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear. ¹⁴ You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you— ¹⁵ for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God—lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth.

The following is from Deuteronomy, Chapter 28, where we see what happens when the People of God start taking for granted the gifts God has given his people. If they fall to the temptation of emulating the peoples who surround them and begin worshipping pagan gods, and they stop obeying and worshipping the one true God, war will come upon God's people. And I have edited this:

“ ⁴⁷ Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart ⁴⁸ therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. ⁴⁹ The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth, swooping down like the eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, ⁵⁰ a hard-faced nation who shall not respect the old or show mercy to the young.

⁵² “They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. And they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land, which the LORD your God has given you.

In the Old Testament, the People of God are as violent as God himself. The Philistines are a warlike people who are constantly at war with the Israelites. At one point the pagan Philistines conquer Israel and take the Arc of the Covenant away. They kill tens of thousands of Israelites. The Israelites destroy the Philistines, as well as other nations that attack them. This is from 1 Samuel, Chapter 14:

⁴⁷ When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines. Wherever he turned he routed them.

⁴⁸ And he did valiantly and struck the Amalekites and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them.

The Chosen People also slaughter the residents of Canaan, so that they can claim this land as their promised land. This is from the 7th Chapter of Deuteronomy. Notice that the killing of the Canaanites is commanded so that the people of God will not be surrounded by pagans, thus removing the temptation to return to worshipping pagan gods instead of the one, true God:

***7** “When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, ² and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. ³ You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons*

or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods.

Here are two reflections on the bloodshed in the Old Testament. First, it is almost always perpetrated in order to keep the Israelites from worshipping false gods or to remove the temptation of doing so. Second, it is almost certainly true that most of this violence never happened historically. The violence in the Old Testament is part of a faith story engineered to show God's loyalty to people who worship only him, and the dangers of worshipping human-like gods made of stone, wood, and metal. King Josiah, the 16th King of Judah, the northern part of Israel, and who lived around 600 B.C., about 400 years after King David, is probably responsible for much of this rewriting of Scripture. He did this to focus on the need to worship only the God of the Israelites, and to argue that God will indeed reward those who obey and worship only him. Josiah did this to lend legitimacy to his own rule. He had the stories of people like Moses, David, and Saul dramatized in order get the population of Israel to stand behind Josiah as their king, as he was a descendent of the now-great King David. Josiah, at a time when Israel had become complacent spiritually, and were not studying Scripture or honoring holy days, and were in fact becoming pagan, engineered a massive faith revival. He apparently did this in part by having people rewrite parts of the Bible. We do not know what

parts are true historically, and which parts are not, although scholars believe that most of the violence of the Old Testament never happened.

In contrast, the New Testament portrays God and the people who obey God's will in a very different light. Jesus is not at all like Hebrew leaders in Egypt, Israelite leaders in Canaan, and Jewish leaders in Old Testament Israel. God himself stops using violence to serve his will and to teach his people. During Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, he says this:

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Jesus seems almost to be referring to a different God than the Old Testament God when he proclaims this:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

If evidence that God is perfect is that he loves his enemies and he loves Gentiles, most of whom are pagans at this time, is this truly the same God that we read about

in the Hebrew Scriptures? Is this the God who slaughters non-believers and Israelites who have fallen to the temptation of living like pagan Gentiles?

There is, we should note, violence in the New Testament. In Matthew 12, Jesus tells a parable where he compares a trusted manager who takes his responsibilities seriously and watches over an estate to one who is lazy and irresponsible:

⁴⁵ But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, ⁴⁶ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful.

This sounds very violent. But keep in mind this is a parable. Jesus is using the language of violence to emphasize how important it is that we remain vigilant in our lives - and that we not get lazy about our duty to God. He is not actually suggesting that anyone in the real world should be cut to pieces.

In Chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes this to the believers in Corinth:

¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. ²¹ What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

Paul is warning these people about the dangers of false teachers, those who would pervert the lessons of Christ. Note that he writes this just after saying: *"I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel."* He is continuing the metaphor of a

spiritual leader being a sort of father who could punish a child, not suggesting that he is going to truly beat the adult believers in Corinth. And yes, they believed in corporal punishment back then, so the analogy would seem appropriate to them at the time. Again, this is the language of violence, not actual violence.

The most extreme violence in the New Testament is in Revelation. In Chapter 19, God invites a sort of feast of the enemies of good:

17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, 18 to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great."

But again, this is the language of violence, and Revelation itself is largely an allegory. This wording is dramatic and drives home a point about the punishment that will come to those who live lives of greed and sin. In truth, when they die, they will be forever separated from God, and from an emotional perspective, this is like being eaten by wild animals. Beside telling us about God dealing with evil at the End Times, Revelation is probably also an allegory about the predicted, horribly violent fall of the Roman Empire – as well as all oppressive regimes.

I'd like to get back to that young man in his early twenties who asked me if the God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament. The answer, technically, is yes, absolutely. It is the context in which God is addressing us that

has changed. In the Old Testament, God is in a world where virtually no one knows him, at least not in any fully fleshed out fashion. People are struggling all over the planet to figure out just who God is. The people he chooses to serve as his first hosts on Earth are surrounded by multi-god pagans who view gods as a mixture of good and evil people who hold authority over peoples' lives. These gods are often vain and ignorant, and they seem more like mentally ill humans with superpowers. So, God focuses on one issue: getting people to recognize him and to understand the basics of who God is. In the New Testament, the fact that God exists, and is only one God, and is a trustworthy, protective, and loving God – that is taken as an axiom. An axiom is a rudimentary fact that cannot be broken down into other facts, and that we take as an absolute truth, even if we cannot prove it scientifically. For instance, an axiom is that if $a = b$ and $b = c$, then $a = c$. In the Old Testament, God has to often uses brutal means to get peoples' attention and to clear the way so that his people can build their faith and leave a foundation behind for others to build upon. In the New Testament, the existence and basic nature of God is an axiom. Jesus came to Earth to move us beyond this.

Now, the job of those who are followers of Jesus is to remain confident in our faith, and to remember the lessons of the Old Testament – and the biggest one of that is that we cannot succumb to the temptations of a selfish, spoiled, and

corrupt world. Not that much time has passed. The universe is thought to be 13.7 billion years old we think. God has existed for all of eternity. Jesus walked this planet a mere 2,000 years ago, a cosmic blink of the eye. We are the possessors of a very young faith. We are to build the roots of that faith. Yes, Christianity needs a revival, but while those of us in the western part of the world seem to be drifting away, people in Africa, the Americas bellow the U.S., and in Asia are keeping the faith alive for us, and growing it, in fact. I believe that faith will come alive again in the West and our job is to keep the ground fertile. We do this by living the way Jesus told us to live – and that means to do our absolute best every minute of every day to remember who we are. We are joyful people, with an eternal, even more joyous life ahead of us. We pass on God’s love and grace to those around us. We forgive. We bless. We show how much more rewarding our path is than the path upon which so many so-called “first” world people walk upon.

Let’s look at one more passage about violence in the New Testament. It’s from Luke, Chapter 19: ²⁷*“But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me.”* This sounds pretty brutal. But for one thing, this is in a parable and is thus not actual violence. It is about a powerful man who goes away, leaving various people with money to

invest. The ones who provide some return on the money are rewarded with vastly greater riches, even if the original return is very small. But those who simply bury the money and then give it back to the man when he returns will end up with nothing. The ones who will be slaughtered are different people, those whom the wealthy man never trusted in the first place. The lesson is that those who do not accept God have a terrible, eternal lesson waiting for them. Those who have faith and don't share it will end up just fine for eternity, but they will feel a lingering coldness, realizing the opportunity they lost on Earth. And those who do anything significant at all to bring the joy of Christ to others – they will get the most brilliant, vibrant reward. Amen.