

Hebrews 1:1-12

1 In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. 4 So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father'? (Psalm 2:7) Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'? (2 Samuel 17:14)

6 And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'

7 In speaking of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels spirits, and his servants flames of fire.' (Psalm 104:4)

8 But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom.

9 You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.'

10 He also says, 'In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.

11 They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment.

12 You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.'

What is God like?

This is Richard Dawkins from *The God Delusion* "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."

It's obvious from the writing of Richard Dawkins, who was actually brought up in an Anglican family, that one of the biggest reasons so many people find it difficult to accept the truth of Christianity is that their image of God is badly distorted by the content of the Old Testament scriptures. And one of the main reasons for *that* is the belief of many Christians that the whole of the Bible is the infallible rather than the inspired word of God. In an age where science is expected to eventually explain everything, the Bible has been relegated to something on a level with superstition because it doesn't fit into our scientific understanding of the world. But it's not a scientific or even a historical document. It's the inspired word of God. Writing inspired by God, but written by human beings, and so we have to approach it in an entirely different way. My main point is that God in the Old Testament can't make sense to us until we understand who Jesus is.

I owe a lot to the American anabaptist pastor and theologian Greg Boyd who's written extensively on this issue. Here are a couple of examples of the warrior God from the Old Testament to start with:

Jeremiah 13:14 *I will smash them one against the other, parents and children alike, declares the Lord. I will allow no pity or mercy or compassion to keep me from destroying them.*”

Deuteronomy 20:16 *in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. 17 Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you.*

This command is given 37 times in the Old Testament. So we have to face the elephant in the room, if we call ourselves christians, of whether we *really* think this is what God is like, because the likes of Mr Dawkins will have everyone believe that He is. Personally I couldn't (and I don't) put faith in the God he describes. Surely noone seriously could? So we have to find another explanation. Some bible scholars simply say that such things as described in Deuteronomy never happened. Others try and explain it as somehow an aspect of God's righteous wrath. And yet strangely, having stated in Genesis 2 that a man and a woman were to become one flesh for life, the Lord never condemns the subsequent polygamy of David, Samuel and Solomon! And of course Jesus was quite happy to overturn Old Testament laws. As Greg Boyd says, 'something else must be going on here'.

I think the answer is in some ways surprisingly straightforward. Remember these are Hebrew scriptures written by many people across a span of 1500 years before Jesus.

Not to dismiss them, far from it. St Paul says this about them: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.* It's inspired by God, but written by fallible human beings who lived in a very violent culture, with a very sketchy and undeveloped idea of God as, at times, a violent warrior. Boyd says this in his book *Cross Vision: We can think of God as a heavenly missionary to our fallen and all-too-barbaric planet. And we can think of the biblical narrative as the inspired written witness to God's missionary activity. ...God couldn't simply barge in and **force** people to stop practices he found offensive. Given that God created people free and thus with the potential for love, he must work by means of a loving influence rather than coercion. God ...therefore always worked to reveal as much of his true character and will **as was possible while accommodating the fallen state of his people only as much as was necessary**, though... it grieved him deeply to do so.*

And of course he isn't the first to think this, Origen, an Egyptian theologian, had similar ideas in the 3rd century AD. Origen once went so far as to say that "unless the OT is interpreted in a spiritual sense and as pointing to Christ, it amounts to nothing more than Jewish fables." The full picture of God is revealed in Jesus. If we really want to know what God is like, we **must** look at Jesus. If we want to understand the Old Testament, we **must** look at Jesus.

In his resurrection appearance on the Emmaus road, Jesus explains to the disciples how the whole of the OT prepares the ground for his coming. *Luke 24:27: beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.* The Old Testament is all about Jesus and points to him. The very name christian means we're known for our faith in Jesus. And we know that what the bible says about Jesus, and what caused his death at the hands of the very people whose 'reference manual' was the Old Testament, was his claim not only to be the prophesied Messiah, but to equality with God. So we worship Jesus as God become man. God was and is one of us. I've mentioned before the guy who walked out of my home group because I said that without Jesus there was no Christianity. He found Jesus embarrassing. He would rather believe in his own image of God. Many of us still retain that idea in our minds that maybe came from school or parents, of a remote and angry being who threatened punishment, which was used to control us. The idea of controlling others is deeply unchristian. The image of the warrior God suited the Roman Empire when in the 4th century Constantine adopted Christianity as the state religion, but simultaneously he had to justify wars. The church to its shame abandoned its peaceful principles at that point, and many churches are still compromised by state involvement today. The passage from Hebrews we heard gives us the perspective of a person who has experienced the resurrected Jesus.

And crucially someone who has received the gift of the Holy Spirit, who supernaturally gives us understanding of all this, if we seek it. *Hebrews 1:3 The Son (Jesus) is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*

8 But about the Son [God] says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever. Direct quote from Psalm 45:6 Unless there are two Gods, this repeats the claim that Jesus was God, from the mouth of God himself.

So you can put the whole of the Bible in this context, that God was in the process, over centuries, of preparing the Jewish people for his own coming into the world, by gradually shifting them from their very crude understanding of who He was and how he acted, to something closer and closer to the truth. This was never going to happen in an instant. It had to happen at the right time, when the world was in a place to receive the message.

And so the Bible account from Genesis and Moses through the prophets and up to the gospels, is the story of how God brought Israel to that point. So when Richard Dawkins and others extract a picture of God from it and berate christians for worshipping a monster, they're taking an early chapter as if it were the conclusion of the book. The truth was different.

The truth was, well Jesus, as he himself claimed, was the truth. What is God like? Well God is like Jesus, look no further than that. Amen