

MHCC Sermon

~~The Dark Side of the Bible~~

~~The Star Wars God~~

~~Digging a hole for yourself in the OT~~

The Invisible Words

Paul Gioia - November, 2010

This is a story about a journey. I've been on it for a while, and I think there's still a fair way to go. It involves delving into some uncomfortable theological territory. Why am I sharing it with you now? Blame Clare - she put me up to it. There was a gap in the roster and we'd been chatting - why not share where I was up to and maybe to get some ideas and support from you.

I would like to hear your ideas. But can I ask a favour? Given the contentious nature of where we're about to go, can we just hear each other's ideas without debating them? This isn't the place for that and we don't have time. You have to promise you'll be saints and not jump on me or anyone else. Is that a deal?

This story starts off with a creative urge to write some songs for worship, but winds up challenging some of my understanding of Scripture. Not in any new way, but more of the same, much more. BTW Noah's Ark does not do well in this story.

Let's start at the beginning. I wanted to write yet another song along social justice lines. Here's how I normally do it.

How to write a social justice song

Where do you get the best justice bits in the Bible? The Prophets! Hmmm, which one? Maybe Amos - I seem to recall some great themes in Amos, though it's been years since I actually read it. In time-honoured tradition let's not dig into a commentary just yet. Let the words speak for themselves.

Amos 1:

¹ The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash^[a] was king of Israel.

OK so that's the context. He's a working class guy - gets his hands dirty. He's addressing Israel, the northern Kingdom. Jeroboam's in charge. Let's look for some positive things first.

Amos 5: The Day Of The Lord

¹⁴ Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. ¹⁵ Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.

Great passage. Not quite sure what the mercy on Joseph bit is about. Just for balance, let's look for something about injustice.

¹¹ You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. ¹² For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

OK, so Israel under Jeroboam is not in a good state. They oppress and take advantage of the poor. The justice system is broken. Let's read on...

²¹ "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. ²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. ²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps (*and I'm thinking zithers and lyres and bass guitars and drums enclosed in transparent acoustic shields and dreamy synthesiser sounds while you're praying - sorry, that's my cynicism talking*). ²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

This just hooks right in to all my prejudices towards big church corporations, all those hour-long God-is-my-boyfriend worship sessions, while outside the poor starve and justice is ignored. God's coming across rather angry, and I'm feeling a bit of that righteous wrath myself. So how come Israel is in this position? Let's read the chapter before, just for a bit of context:

Amos 4: Israel Has Not Returned to God

¹ Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!" ² The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness: "The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks.^[a] ³ You will each go straight out through breaches in the wall, and you will be cast out toward Harmon,^[b]" declares the LORD.

⁴ "Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years.^[c] ⁵ Burn leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings— boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do," declares the Sovereign LORD.

⁶ "I gave you empty stomachs in every city and lack of bread in every town, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

⁷ "I also withheld rain from you when the harvest was still three months away. I sent rain on one town, but withheld it from another. One field had rain; another had none and dried up. ⁸ People staggered from town to town for water but did not get enough to drink, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

⁹ "Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, destroying them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

¹⁰ "I sent plagues among you as I did to Egypt. I killed your young men with the sword, along with your captured horses. I filled your nostrils with the stench of your camps, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

¹¹ "I overthrew some of you as I overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD.

¹² "Therefore this is what I will do to you, Israel, and because I will do this to you, Israel, prepare to meet your God."

¹³ He who forms the mountains, who creates the wind, and who reveals his thoughts to mankind, who turns dawn to darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth— the LORD God Almighty is his name.

Now hang on a bit. This is the God of justice we're talking about - the one who hates oppression and violence. This is one of the Prophets that Jesus does not take one word away from. This is Amos inspired by God, describing God's true character; and rooted in history. I'm actually quite stunned by the sick and dysfunctional images described here. These are images I've read many times before, but for some reason they haven't stood out like they have now. So what is it in particular that bothers me?

- God withheld food in an effort to get his people to return to him
- God created droughts in one town, but not another, again so that his people would return to him
- God destroyed their crops
- God sent disease.
- God killed their young men with the sword (presumably we interpret this as an army or other agent acting on God's behest that did the killing); and so much so the stench of death filled their camps.
- He overthrew them like he did with Sodom and Gomorrah.

If this were not God we were talking about, but some human figure, how would we describe them today? This is not the God I love and trust. My plans to write a song on social justice from Amos are on hold. He's a bit of a dud.

I mention this to Nathan and a few weeks later, bless his socks, he lends me two books from the Vose Library that might help understand this text: the first is a book by Eric Seibert called *Disturbing Divine Behaviour*, and the second a commentary on Hosea and Amos. (I haven't got around to reading the second yet - me and commentaries.)

Writing a song about Mother God

In the meantime, Clare has put a challenge to me. She knows I'm in writing mode, and asks "can I write a song that draws on feminine descriptions of God from the Bible?", such as they are. Well that's a challenge. God as Mother? I can do that. And "Oh," she says a bit later, "can you make her have claws?" Huh? "You know, not that namby-pamby image of the dutiful wife in pink fluffy slippers, more like the eagle defending her nest, with sharp talons." OK...

By this stage I have a great tune - a really great tune. I just need some words. So, using Clare's reading list, I read things like:

Genesis 1

²⁷ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

That's fine - God is both male and female, like a hermaphrodite.

Deuteronomy 32

⁹ For the LORD's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted inheritance. ¹⁰ In a desert land he found him, in a barren and howling waste. He shielded him and cared for him; he guarded him as the apple of his eye, ¹¹ like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft.

Cool. I can put the claws in. That's verse one and two done.

Hosea 13

⁴ "But I have been the LORD your God ever since you came out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Saviour except me. ⁵ I cared for you in the wilderness, in the land of burning heat. ⁶ When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me. ⁷ So I will be like a lion to them, like a leopard I will lurk by the path. ⁸ Like

a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open; like a lion I will devour them—a wild animal will tear them apart.

Hmm, that's not a very safe image of God. How about another one:

Isaiah 49

¹⁴ But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." ¹⁵ "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! ¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

Those are some beautiful images. But hang on, compare this with v24-26 just a little later on:

²⁵ But this is what the LORD says: "Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save. ²⁶ I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine. Then all mankind will know that I, the LORD, am your Saviour, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."

To be fair to Clare, she also provided lots of passages with beautiful images of God as mother - and not just pink-fluffies mother, but the strong mother who would give her own life to protect her young. But not far away are similar passages to those we found in Amos.

So by now I'm quite hesitant. I've been reading of a God who is loving and kind one minute, and a vindictive abuser or violent warrior the next. How do I make sense of this?

After sitting on this for a while, I start to develop just a thread of an idea, a way of explaining this Jekyll and Hyde God.

And if you thought that was bad enough...

I finally pick up the book *Disturbing Divine Behaviour*, in the hope it will make sense of those disturbing images. I was wrong. Siebert's first 150 pages shout "So you think the prophets are bad? Wait till you read Genesis and Exodus." Well, thank you Eric. Here are some samples, skimming very quickly:

Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22) - ¹ Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

- Child abuse? The worst kind of emotional abuse?

The Egyptian army and Red Sea (Exodus 14:24 - 15:5) Let's pick up from V3: ³ The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. ⁴ Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea. The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the Red Sea.^[b] ⁵ The deep waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone.

- That looks like a massacre to me.

Taking the land of Canaan (Deut. 7:1-2; Josh. 10:40) ¹ When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations..., then you must destroy them totally.^[a] Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy... ⁴⁰ So Joshua subdued the whole region... He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded.

- Is that ethnic cleansing?

Amalekite punishment (1 Sam. 15:2-3) ² This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. ³ Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy^[a] all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.'"

- There's a word for this - genocide

Noah's Ark (Gen. 6-9). The sad thing about Noah's Ark is I've always tackled it in terms of its implausibility in the light of science. But it was only in reading Seibert's book I reflected on the significance of that story - global genocide, if we assume a literal reading of the story.

And finally, **The Final Judgement** (Rev. 19) that, if taken literally, makes all the other passages look PG rated. Remember *Faithful and True*?

As an aside, I remember having a conversation with Graham Chipps many years ago about this song. I wrote it because of some powerful images I remember from reading Bible stories as a kid. Horses, slashing swords, kings, robes dipped in blood, albeit about the Word of God rather than real warfare - real boy's stuff! He was reflecting how few songs in our worship lexicon contained masculine images and how much he liked this one because he could relate to it better. Thinking about Clare's claws, maybe she's after something similar.

I think the Bible has made a mess of pronouns because of the gender gerrymander. But, by and large, if you swap the 'he's with the 'she's lots of passages themes would fit comfortably under the feminine tag. Ironic if it's true.

And as I write now, I wonder whether there's some truth in what Graham was saying. Maybe some of us really do need a bit of Star Wars shoot-'em-up language to relate to.

What's wrong with these passages? They describe a God who is completely at odds with the picture of God I get from the NT.

Look, I'm sorry to take you here - really sorry. But this is where I am.

These passages have been in the Bible forever, yet I don't ever remember a sermon specifically dealing with them. So I'm not sure how to deal with them now. So let's look at how we've dealt with these difficult verses historically. So how have others dealt with them?

How have we dealt with this till now?

Others?

Siebert provides a good summary of theological responses from people who have seriously and prayerfully considered the above passages. They include:

- **Divine immunity** - God can do anything he likes because he's God. End of story.
- **Just cause** - There are probably good reasons for God's actions - we just can't see them right now
- **The greater good** - the end justifies the means
- **Progressive revelation** - God revealed his character and will gradually over time, so the Israelites wouldn't have been able to see the full quid.
- **Permissive will** - God sometimes let people do bad things because they operate at a such a primitive level already. Remember the phrase "a concession to their man's wickedness"? God tries to guide them to choose the lesser of other evils

Me?

And me? These passages, or at least their moral significance, have been largely invisible. But why? I can think of a few possible reasons:

1. I've never ever heard a sermon dealing with the subject.
2. Countless Sunday School Bible stories might have desensitised me.
3. I probably moved between all the above approaches without really being conscious of it.

None of the above explanations for God's behaviour cut it for Siebert. And now, after some reflection, they don't cut it for me either.

Underlying assumptions

An important aside before we go further: one fundamental assumption I've had as I read the Old Testament is that the books that look historical actually are. The order in which they were written might be dodgy (think about the exile) - but the events described, by and large, happened. Moses is real. Joshua is real. David is real.

I've also assumed a pretty orthodox understanding of Scripture's inspiration and authority. In other words, despite the fact humans wrote down the words, the God they describe is pretty much what he's really like, and therefore those words should be binding on our lives.

Well, if we try to hang onto all of that, Siebert thinks we have some real problems. Whatever our explanation, we will have great difficulty in accommodating these OT descriptions of God that are sometimes in stark contrast with the picture of God revealed to us through Jesus. And I'm inclining to agree with Siebert.

So, are there any explanations?

Occam's Razor

Before we do that, a word about explanations and theories: William of Ockham (c. 1285–1349) is the great logician to who is attributed the famous maxim "Ockham's razor". The term razor (or knife) refers to distinguishing between two theories by "shaving away" unnecessary assumptions. It's sometimes translated as the law of parsimony. The idea is that "the simplest explanation is more likely to be the correct one." Put more formally, Occam's Razor recommends selecting the competing hypothesis that makes the fewest new assumptions. It's not foolproof - sometime you can have an elegant, simple solution to a complex problem that's completely wrong. But, on the whole, it's a good rule of thumb.

As an example: consider the age of the Earth. You see weathered, cracked rocks, layered soil profiles with humanoid fossils range from monkey-like to upright that are carbon-dated to a few million years old. What's the best explanation?

1. They were put there by aliens from Mars. A very short explanation, but introduces new material there is no consensus on.
2. God deliberately created things to look old, even though they're only 5000 years. Why? Because he wanted to. But why?.....
3. They look old because - they are old - really, really old, and when you have enough time things that are complex or very unlikely have more time to happen.



Inspiration

So, as I read the text in Amos over and over again, I have this image of someone trying to make sense of their world. I imagine Amos reflecting on the wickedness and injustice of the nations around him, especially Israel's. And I also imagine God touching Amos, acknowledging his anger over the corruption he saw. Somewhere, somehow those two images meet, and what we see is an untidy, messed up inspiration that talks to what is on both God's and Amos' heart. And God has not cleaned it up.

Amos is a product of his time. Although he deeply believes in and worships God, he articulates the profound thoughts of his heart as best he can through his particular context - social, political, etc., and his world view.

At this point Siebert's book is really helpful. He discusses a number of situations where someone's context might affect the way they describe events or ascribe certain characteristics to God, such as to explain disasters or national failures, to encourage certain beliefs and behaviours, to build a sense of identity and inspire hope. But maybe to also support the current elite in power, or to justify territorial expansion.

Siebert also talks about Israel's theological world view, ideas such as God controls the natural world, God causes personal and natural misfortunes, God rewards the obedient and punishes the disobedient, God sanctions warfare and brings victory and defeat in battle, everything happens because God causes it, and so on. We may well share some of these beliefs.

So my working hypothesis is this: rather than the top-down theology we've been taught all these years, maybe it's much more of a bottom-up theology. Suppose, just suppose, that the OT is a collection of writings much more influenced by the human writers than we've previously given credit for.

I don't know if this is true. It's just a working hypothesis. Hopefully there is a whole raft of books just on this subject to help me. I'm going to reflect on it for a while. I'll think about it in the light of Occam's razor.

BTW, it also happens that that approach is largely the one Siebert takes. How about that?

Historicity

A word about history: I don't have a problem with miracles. I'm not one of these rationalists who tries to reduce everything to a material world. So if I come to the conclusion that something the Bible says happened didn't, it's not because of miracles.

Again, Occam's Razor is useful. If I have to invent a million new assumptions to accommodate certain preferred explanations, rather than hundreds, those theories should carry less weight. It was on that basis that I discounted a literal Adam and Eve, and Noah's Ark many years. I don't have time to discuss my reasons now, but I'm more than happy to knock back a pint or three and have a yarn with you. (But in case you're worried, it hasn't changed the nature of my faith. I haven't gone off the rails. I still worship a literal, risen Jesus.)

So, for me personally, if theologians can demonstrate good reasons why stuff didn't happen - as Siebert does, I'm open to it as long as the evidence is there. And if that also happens to solve some of the problems above, all's well and good. *Just so long as we're not dismissing certain texts just because they don't fit our world view.*

So how do we determine what God is really like?

So how do we do that? How do we avoid creating a God of our own making while wrestling with the above passages? About a millisecond before I read Siebert's answer I thought to myself - well, where have I obtained my picture of God that is so at odds with some of the pictures of God in the OT? Jesus, of course!

Siebert agrees with me. He suggests developing a Christ-centred method for interpreting the OT. He says, "To see Jesus is to see God". The Gospel of John spends a lot of time on that subject. So what kind of God does Jesus describe through his teaching, his parables and his life?

- A God who is kind to the wicked
- A God who is non-violent
- A God who doesn't judge people by causing disasters or infirmities
- A God who loves

The first three are in stark contrast to God's character as described by the passages above.

Considering the word view Jesus was born into, it makes it all the more remarkable that he should reflect that kind of God. What an incredible revelation he brought to those around him of what God is really like. And because we follow Christ, Jesus' view of God takes precedence where it appears to differ from that in the OT. And yet this leaves us in a predicament, because Jesus sanctioned the law and the prophets:

Matthew 5

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

I guess the key is in the phrase "fulfilling the law".

Where to now?

So where to now? By adopting more bottom-up view on inspiration and authority I can reconcile some of the problems I've described. By adopting Jesus' view of God, I can put to one side contradictory descriptions, at least for the time being.

But, of course, isn't this what we all do anyway? A silent filter that puts to one side the violent, vengeful God when it doesn't fit our understanding from Jesus' life and teachings.

While Siebert seems pretty upbeat about reinterpreting the OT with new eyes, I'm not totally convinced yet. These approaches raise as many questions as answers, and I will be keeping a keen eye to Occam's knife.

God is not worried about this theological journey I'm on. He's not rattled a bit. The worst that can happen is I might waste some of my time, and possibly yours. But I'm also a great believer that when we sincerely search for the truth God honours our endeavours, despite the meandering path we take. In this I need your love and patience.

Despite all those assurances, some of you are probably still concerned I've fallen off the true path. So for the Baptists and Sydney Anglicans among us, here is my Christian checklist:

- Do I believe Jesus is the Son of God? Yes!
- Do I believe he physically rose from the dead? Yes!
- Do I believe in physical miracles? Yes!
- Did Jesus support the OT? Yes! Not one word shall be taken away.
- Do I believe the NT is an accurate historical record of what it describes? For the most part, yes!

- Is it useful for teaching us what to believe and how to live? Yes!
- Do I still believe the OT is a historical record of what it describes? In bits.
- Is the OT still useful for teaching us what to believe and how to live? I think so, but the next part of my journey is to make sense of where I've been, where I am now and what God is saying to me.
- Is this my final view? I highly doubt it.

I hope I'm still in the club!

- And am I any closer to finishing off those songs? No.

Any questions?