

Let's Read the Bible! God, the OT & us

No 9 in our occasional series [3/2020]

1. Introduction:

Have you read Ruth Robertson's book "Am I missing something?" A book about "Christianity through the eyes of an unbeliever."^[1] It's a book about how God delights in Ruth, rescues her, betters her life, challenges her thinking and ways, and how she comes to delight in Him. It's a struggle with love. And part of that struggle for her is, what to make of God as revealed in the Old Testament [OT]?

2. It's not a new concern: a little bit of history.

In the early years of the Church there was a man called Marcion [about 85-160 AD]. The more he read the bible the more he had a problem with the OT. He came to think that the Jehovah of the OT and the God of Jesus could not be the same God.

He suggested there were two gods: Jehovah was the local tribal god of the Jews, who was legalistic and judgemental – a god who punished sin with suffering and death. By contrast he saw Jesus as the Son of a heavenly Father God whose way was compassion and love, treating people with forgiveness and mercy.

This led Marcion to produce a Bible, which consisted of most of Paul's letters and a shorter version of Luke's Gospel and nothing else. He not only sifted the Bible to express his ideas, he also sifted Jesus. For Marcion, Jesus did not have a physical birth, death or resurrection, and He was not God with God. This is where people so often end up, when they make a difference between the Jehovah God of the OT and Jesus eg the Jehovah Witnesses. So how might we better see God and the OT and us? Here's a suggestion from me.

3. Let's avoid the temptation of starting with us!

Let's start with Jesus. He is the centre of God's purposes, the image of the living God, the one true human being. And let's recall what He came to do. John summarises it in his 1st letter: to destroy the devil's work. [c3 v8b] And that leads us to creation.

As we read in Genesis 1:1 before God created the world He made the heavens, and as is revealed in the scriptures He populated heaven with angels. One of the main angels – maybe even the chief angel - was Lucifer, which means Light Bringer. Sadly, Lucifer was so stricken with his exalted position that he rebelled against God. The Light Bringer wanted to be the Light. But he was a creature, not the Creator. He lost the right to carry God's light, and fell into darkness. [see Isaiah 14:12 ff & Ezekiel 28:12ff ^[21]]

Lucifer was evicted from heaven, but not from earth. Having turned many angels against God, he set about turning people against God, seeking to deliver us from God's rule into his own. Sadly he was and is very effective in that. So even when Jesus came to His own His own did not recognise Him: Herod, the king of God's people tried to kill Him as a baby and later the religious rulers of God's people tried to kill Him as a man!

4. Our spiritual rebellion has physical creation consequences.

The Fall of Man in Eden, whether you see it as a parable or as a real historical event, explains that the world we live in is twisted out of joint, because we trusted and followed the devil's words and not God's. This is basically the heart of sin.

God crafted us with Maker's Instructions in our nature but we prefer to make our own instructions for how we will live. The devil's desire to be God fathered a rebellious desire in us to be like god. We thought then and think now that doing our will, instead of doing God's will, would lead us into great delight, but rather it brings us into suffering and death and a fearful darkness. Our refusal to live in a loving, trusting, intimate and obedient relationship with God exiled us from our home with Him. And also broke creation. The result of listening to the devil was to exchange life in God's blessing for life under His curse.

5. What was God to do?

Was He to give up on us, walk away and leave us imprisoned in the devil's dark, malignant care?

Was He to wipe us out and all the angels, Lucifer and his rebels included and all nature, starting all over again, with creatures who would not have the free will to defy Him?

Was He to get involved with us in such a way that would achieve His original purpose: keeping us from evil, rescuing us from the dominion of darkness, and returning us to the Kingdom of the Son He loves, through taking away our sins, and enabling our redemption and forgiveness. Praise God that He chose this option. Think of the alternatives if He had not.

6. Now this option brings up the tricky question of how is God to achieve His aim without evil vetoing His justice & mercy?

In a fallen world run by the god of this age people will be blinded to the light of God's love. They will oppose God's aims and ways. All He does to rescue people will be opposed by people. If God then holds back from His purposes to avoid hurting those who oppose Him, He hands the devil a veto on His sovereignty. There has to be limits to what evil can do.

Remember when God speaks with Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah. Although God knows that their sins are grievous He listens to Abraham's plea not to sweep away the righteous with the wicked. He is willing to let all the sinful people live for the sake of 10 righteous people. Abraham prays this with God for he trusts that the Ruler of all the earth will do right. Sadly not even 10 good people can be found and the 2 cities are destroyed. It is a great tragedy that many lost their lives but it would be an even greater disaster if evil was allowed to veto justice.

7. Can we, like Abraham, trust God to do right?

From Abraham onwards God has worked through the world as it is, and people as we are. This doesn't make for a painless process. It

means dealing with a world twisted in evil but not letting it block His plans; and always offering mercy to any who turn to Him.

8. And this OT way leads us to Jesus the One who saves.

In Ezekiel 22:30-31, there's a famous passage where God laments that He looked for one righteous person who would intercede for the people and seek His mercy. But He could find no one, and because of that He brought down on the people's own heads all that they had done. The Jews might have wished for a new Moses, for he had once stood in the gap and saved the people with his prayer, when they rebelled against God. [See Exodus 32:9-14] But God leads us to Jesus Christ.

As Paul writes in Colossians 1:19-20: "God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him and through Him to reconcile all things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross." Our lives have all been bought at a price. [1 Corinthians 6:20]

A price represents a cost. And the price Christ paid is the cost of the value of every human being who has, who is now and will ever live and all the immeasurable value of the entire creation. This is a price beyond us. But not Jesus. It's the price of our rebellion, the cost of our sin, the ransom for our deliverance, freely paid by Jesus. As George Caird once said: "Not only in theological truth but in historic fact, the One bore the sins of the many."

9. In Jesus the promise and hope of the OT is accomplished

In the One, God Himself stands in the gap for the whole world. In the One who utterly, always trusts His Father and never listens to the devil; in the One who does not sin, yet bears all our sin, God rescues us from the devil's dominion of darkness, and brings us into the Kingdom of the One He loves, in whom we are redeemed, forgiven.

The OT is fulfilled in Christ for you. That changes the question
From: *How could Jehovah condemn those who refuse to love Him?*
To: *How will you respond to Jesus Christ who's paid the price of your life?*

One has stood in the gap for all. In His freely offered sinless death He took upon Himself the sins of all the living and dead. In the One, God's love is offered to everyone.

But what of those who lived and died without hearing of Jesus? And of those who still live without hearing the Gospel?

Like Abraham, trust that the Ruler of all the earth will do right. Yet also pray that when people hear of Jesus they will turn to God, for as Jesus says: unless you repent, you too will perish.[Luke 13:5]

Without turning to God, the payment of Jesus' life will not cover you. Our decisions have consequences. In words of faith and in the belief of our hearts there has to be a 'Yes' to Jesus. [Romans 10:9-13]

[1] Ruth Roberts book is published by Authentic Media Ltd 2013
ISBN 978-1-78078-026-9

[2] All scripture references are to the Holy Bible New International Version Copyright 1973,1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society