

The Violence of God in the Old Testament

I recently had an interesting theological conversation with the guys who ride to work with me. Five men were in the car, all Christians, and all but me employed in the business world. The subject came up of God's apparent violence in the Old Testament. We began talking about the story in 2 Kings 2, where the prophet Elisha is mocked by some youths, who say to him, "Go up, you bald-head!" The way I remembered the story, the prophet called down two bears, which mauled the little boys who had dared to insult an old man for his bald head.

However, when I looked at the passage more closely, I realized I had misunderstood it. The "youths" were not little boys. That is a mistranslation by the King James Version. They were probably young teens, old enough to know what they were saying. Elisha did not call down the bears, he only cursed the youths in the name of the Lord. It was God who sent the bears, because these disrespectful youngsters were knowingly mocking a prophet of God, and therefore, God himself. So this is not a story of God mauling some innocent children for teasing a bald man. It's a story of divine judgment upon wilful blasphemy and rejection of the true God.

Even so, the problem of violence remains. The discussion in the car mentioned other strict demands of God, such as the killing of children commanded in 1 Samuel 15:3. In that passage, God tells King Saul to put to death the entire Amalekite nation: men, women, children, and even their animals. One of my friends pointed out that such commands are difficult to reconcile with the New Testament ethic of Jesus, who turned the other cheek and laid down his life for others. Evangelical Christians place a high value on the worth and dignity of every individual, yet it seems that in the Old Testament, that same value for life just isn't there. This kind of thing makes it hard to defend our faith to unbelievers. What can we say in response?

The instances of violence in the Old Testament need to take the historical circumstances into account. Atheists love to pull these passages out of context and try to show that God is cruel, arbitrary, unloving, and unworthy of worship. However, when you take the time to really study the biblical text, God's actions start to make more sense. The judgments are not senseless killings; they are grounded in human sin and rebellion, which bring down God's wrath. In the case of Elisha, wilful blasphemy culminated in divine judgment. In the case of the children who were killed by the Israelite armies, they were part of evil and wicked nations. In the Old Testament mindset, sin was communal, and its consequences came to the entire group, including the children whose parents were guilty of grievous sins.

Of course, at no time does God cease to be merciful. Instances are often recorded where God judges a people, but spares a few who are righteous, even a prostitute like Rahab. We can be sure that the God who looks into every person's heart spared many others as well, whenever he found in those hearts a disposition willing to bend the knee to his will. The biblical God stands in judgment on those who shake their fist at him and resist his commands. And yet, he is merciful and gracious to those who will humble themselves before him in the best way they know how. The real question, then, is: "Which one of these will YOU be?" For Prime Time America, I'm Bryan Litfin. For Moody Radio, I'm Bryan Litfin.