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# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 01, 2007

## The Ethics of God (Bible Brain Busters)

A common objection leveled at the Bible is its unseemly portrayal of God. The Bible attributes some pretty nasty stuff to God. Although these are not limited to the Old Testament, the OT provides the most striking and famous examples. For a sampling of such atrocities, see the [list](#) provided by a reader in the Bible Brain Busters suggestion box.

This is actually a very old objection, dating back to the earliest days of Christianity (and even before that the Jews were already facing this criticism). The age of this problem is both bad news and good news. The bad news is that, since some of the greatest minds have tried to tackle this problem, we will most likely continue to struggle with these texts until the end of time. The good news is that, again since some of the greatest minds have tried to tackle this problem, a number of rich options have been developed to help us begin thinking through this problem for ourselves. In order to keep us from reinventing the wheel, I'll lay out some of these options as a conversation starter.

(1) **Reject the passages.** One option is to simply reject these passages out of hand as not the genuine Word of God. This option should be praised for its intellectual honesty. But on what basis does one determine which parts of the Bible are good and which are bad? One would have to adopt an independent moral code and place the scripture under its authority.

(2) **Accept the passages.** The opposite approach is to just accept the passages as is. God is just like that. God does crazy things like this and tells others to do them. Who are we to judge God? Although this approach evidences a confidence in God's revelation, it does not really answer the question directly but avoids it. Clearly there is something strange about some of God's actions and commands in the Bible that should give us pause.

(3) **Reject the OT.** One famous option (associated with Marcion) has

## About Me



**Name:**  
JohnLDrury  
**Location:**  
Doylestown,  
Pennsylvania, US

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been to reject the Old Testament as the story of an evil God who has been replaced by the good New Testament God. The advantage here is its straightforward theological decisiveness and a seriousness about the newness of the New Testament. The problem, however, is that the New Testament at every point underlines the continuity of God's identity as the God of Israel. Also, this doesn't really solve the problem, since there are some troubling things in the New Testament too (e.g., the Book of Revelation gets pretty bloody!).

(4) **Allegorize the Passages.** A long standing tradition is to see these stories as allegories for one's spiritual life. Killing the prophets of Baal really means putting to death one's fleshy desires. This is a very practically fruitful option and is certainly useful in some cases. However, one runs against the trouble of determining which passages to allegorize and how to properly allegorize them. To answer this question, one is inevitably led to some external guide to make such decisions. Furthermore, the problem of the morality of God's actions is not really solved here, but avoided by a sort of spiritual slight-of-hand.

(5) **Progressive Revelation.** A more nuanced option is to say that God's revelation of himself is a slowly unfolding history whereby he unveils aspects of his character in a cumulative fashion over time. Thus we learn of the judgment of God in some passages, the grace of God in others, all of which come to their culmination in Jesus Christ, where God is definitively revealed. The advantage here is that one can acknowledge the morally objectionable character of some passages without having to right them off. The disadvantage is the can of worms open by a notion of progressive revelation: How do we know that God has definitively revealed himself? On what basis can we discern "progress" in revelatory history? If God was already all these things, why did he not reveal himself accordingly from the beginning? Is God himself progressively growing and figuring things out along the way?

(6) **Progressive Reception of Revelation.** An alternative version of progressive revelation is to see the Bible as God's chosen witness to revelation, and as a human witness it reflects its author's assumptions even as it sufficiently witnesses to God's self-revelation in history. God is who he is, and when he acts in history he acts fully as himself. Yet the human reception of this revelation is not always complete. The advantages here are similar to the notion of progressive revelation, except some of the problematic implications (e.g., progress in God) are cut off. The danger here is that one might be tempted to go through the Bible and says which parts are good and which are bad. Although we can do some internal discernment (according to the rule "scripture interprets scripture"), this is always a tricky thing.

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**Any thoughts?**

Have a rightly described these options?

Are any major options missing?

Are you inclined towards one of these approaches? Why?

What are some additional strengths and weakness of each option?

—

Labels: [Bible Brain Busters](#), [God](#), [hermeneutics](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 10:29 AM

[5 comments](#)

**5 Comments:**

At [11:55 AM, February 02, 2007](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

You won't be surprised to hear me say that a mechanism external to the Bible is always involved in any matter of this sort, for the Bible does not and cannot tell us how to prioritize and integrate its particulars, especially when we read them in their most likely particularity.

It was fun to see Barth's "culling" mechanism on marriage and divorce this week. At one point he pulls some historical critical research out, at another he prioritizes certain OT passages over others. But it is he who is doing it. He may have the Word behind it, but I have no way to know this--it is he himself that is the integrator, not the Bible!

My approach is to assume that that the twin love ethic gives a core Christian ethic (to look to Christ as core tells me almost nothing because I am left to determine what that means). To keep faith with orthodoxy I assume God acts consistent with this ethic in this creation (as you know leaving open the possibility that He could create other ethical universes).

I am then left with various biblical stories to conclude a certain indeterminacy of knowledge: 1) that in some cases we simply do not know how God's actions cohered with this ethic, but by faith they did and 2) in other circumstances the biblical authors may not have had a clear understanding of what was really going on.

My thoughts...

At [9:53 AM, February 05, 2007](#), John Mark said...

Wouldn't it seem in a general sense that #6 is the most logical of your options? I think of the doctrine of the Trinity, which took a long time to formulate and become official teaching of the church. Or take the doctrine of Entire Sanctification as taught by the Holiness Movement and others. It is hard to find a whole host of places in scripture that insist on a second definite experience after coming to

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Christ. Some insist there are none, really. And it seems that Paul could have used far more specific language in his letters to the churches if he was Wesleyan :) in his doctrine. So the teachings seem to be more implicit than explicit. One might wonder if there are other things in the word that we have not discovered, simply because there are no "proof texts" to explain, reveal or validate a certain belief or experience.

I am not a theologian; I freely admit to being in over my head on discussions such as this.

But that's my two cents. Or less.

At [11:25 AM, February 05, 2007](#), [David Drury](#) said...

While I am definately drawn to 5 & 6 theologically I can't help but wonder if #2 is more of a possiblity than we give it credit for.

Perhaps some of the ways we've described God are more limiting characteristics and more utopian -- perhaps we describe God's character as "what we would like God to be like."

Some people would say that we're just summarizing what revelation says about God in those characteristics--but don't these ethically troubling passages of that same revelation "hold the same weight" in describing God as other portions of scripture?

I suppose what I'm trying to say is that perhaps God's actions in history sometimes have "macro-plans" of love but that require "micro-problems" of pain and suffering and ethical dilemas for us.

That's my attempt so far to align to God's Ethics as much as possible instead of trying to fit Him into my ethics.

At [1:59 PM, February 05, 2007](#), [drucousin](#) said...

I have been stopping by lately and found this buster to be the most intriguing to me so far.

I have three thoughts:

1) Any question as to Godly ethics in the Mosaic period seems to be partly (if not fully) addressed by Jesus when he speaks of Mosaic divorce. This seems to weigh towards some kind of progressive method where God is making value judgments and prioritizing between competing values which are in conflict because of sin in His creatures. What I have in mind is similar to but does not seem to fit into either of your progressive categories. The conflict over divorce could be framed as orderliness vs. God-ordained marriage and family or fertility vs fidelity. Maybe this part of the Barth discussion the previous post is talking about.

2) Many of the ethical brain busters seem to involve war and death. Those death busters that come to mind suggest to me more than just a Godly accommodation driven by sinfulness but possibly a fundamental flaw in our understanding of death and its function as a curse. As creatures subject to the curse of death we are far more troubled by death, its timing, and the various ways it comes about than God. This might fall into the indeterminacy of knowledge category suggested above. Death casts a sweeping pall over our view of the world and looms large in our moral valuations. In our 21st century culture, there is no greater wrong than genocide and war; however from God's perspective its difficult to say how issues like dying now rather than later and in large groups compared to dying individually weigh-in.

3) Fear and Trembling. Kierkegaard. For me a brain busting treatment of the Ethics of God. After wrestling with Kierkegaard, I think was personally more into the accepting mode. If the great brains of the past couldn't figure these things out, I better accept Scripture and do my best to wrestle with the puzzles from a position of faith and belief.

At [11:02 PM, February 06, 2007](#), Anonymous said...

Does the defense that God created us, and therefore has the right at any time to take our life... hold merit with you?

In other words, what's right for God wouldn't be right for us because we're not divine?

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