

# Mean, Angry Old Testament God vs. Nice, Loving New Testament God?

**... not so fast.** This is a common stereotype! Yes, parts of the Old Testament depict divine wrath, while parts of the New Testament show divine love and forgiveness.

But, there are THREE reasons this stereotype is wrong.

## 1. IT EMPHASIZES SOME TEXTS, BUT IGNORES MANY OTHERS.

In order to demonstrate how this stereotype is dependent on a careful selection of texts, let's try to make the reverse argument: That the OT God is loving & the NT God is angry.

| DIVINE LOVE & MERCY IN THE OT   | DIVINE WRATH & VIOLENCE IN THE NT   |
|---|---|
| <p><i>God requires love and equal treatment for all, regardless of where they are from:</i></p> <p>"The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself." (Leviticus 19:34)</p>   | <p><i>Sinners are like yard waste - they'll be burned:</i></p> <p>[Jesus's] disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:36-43)</p> |
| <p><i>God gently cares for all plants and animals:</i></p> <p>10 [God] makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains.<br/>           11 They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst.<br/>           12 The birds of the sky nest by the waters; they sing among the branches.<br/>           13 He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.<br/>           14 He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth:<br/>           15 wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts.<br/>           16 The trees of the Lord are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.<br/>           (Ps 104)</p> | <p><i>Jesus curses a fig tree because he's hangry:</i></p> <p>[Jesus] was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see whether perhaps he would find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. He said to it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again.' And his disciples heard it. (Mark 11: 12-14)</p>  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><i>God is a gentle shepherd who carries people in his arms like baby animals:</i></p> <p>He tends his flock like a shepherd:<br/> He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. (Isaiah 40:11)</p>  | <p><i>God will torture sinners forever even after death:</i></p> <p>When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. (2 Thess 1:7-9)</p>   |
| <p><i>God is compassionate and slow to anger:</i></p> <p>“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.” (Exodus 34:6)</p>   | <p><i>Jesus says he has come to sow violence:</i></p> <p>‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. (Mt 10: 34-39)</p>   |
| <p><i>God heals, protects, forgives, and does not judge people based on their sins:</i></p> <p>2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—<br/> 3 who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,<br/> 4 who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy...<br/> 6 The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed...<br/> 8 The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.<br/> 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.<br/> 10 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.<br/> 11 For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him...<br/> 13 As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. (Ps. 103)</p> | <p><i>On Judgement Day, God will condemn some people to suffer in a lake of fire forever:</i></p> <p>Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20: 11-15)</p> |

**YIKES!** We found plenty of love and mercy in the OT, and lots of violence and vengeance in the NT.

**Does this mean that God is actually loving and merciful in the Hebrew Bible, but vengeful in the New Testament?**

**NO.** These examples are meant to illustrate that the “angry OT God vs loving NT God” stereotype ignores lots of anger and violence in the New Testament, and lots of divine love and care in the Hebrew Bible. **Anger and love are BOTH present** in the Old Testament **AND** in the New Testament.

Identifying the OT with anger and the NT with love doesn’t reflect what’s really there in the texts—it is a **result of pre-existing assumptions, commitments, and prejudices.**

## 2. IT OVERLOOKS THE REASONS WHY GOD IS OFTEN DEPICTED AS ANGRY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

**God is angry when vulnerable people are being oppressed.** His anger is often directed at people who pretend to be pious, *but* get rich by exploiting the poor or unjustly manipulating courts of law. Let's look at some examples:

- a) In the Covenant Code in the Book of Exodus, God is very angry with those who take advantage of the poor and vulnerable, including predatory money-lenders, but is compassionate toward those they have harmed.

22 You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan. 23 If you do mistreat them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; 24 my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. 25 If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. 26 If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; 27 for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate. (*Exodus 22:22-27*).

- b) According to the Prophet Amos, God is angry at those who enrich themselves by exploiting the poor through imposing fines, levying taxes, repossessing their goods, and taking advantage of them in court. God's anger will cause these oppressors to lose their wealth.

2:6 They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals...  
7 They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground, and deny justice to the oppressed.... Father and son use the same girl, and so profane my holy name.  
8 They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines. (*Amos 2:6-8*)

5:10 There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court, and detest the one who tells the truth...  
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...  
14 Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. (*Amos 5:10-14*)

### **These *same things* elicit divine wrath and vengeance in the New Testament!**

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus condemns religious leaders who act pious, but get rich and famous by exploiting the poor—the same reason God is angry in the book of Amos:

38 They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces 39 and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. 40 They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely. (*Mark 12:38-40*)

Here's a different example from the community of Jesus-followers in the New Testament book of Acts. Members were required to sell their possessions and pool all their money together. One wealthy couple, Ananias and Saphira, sell their land, but only give *part* of the money to the collective, secretly keeping some of it for themselves. Both are immediately struck dead:

3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ... 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. [...] [Then] 9 Peter said to [Saphira], "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." 10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. .... 11 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (Acts 5:3-11)

And finally:

### **3. ALTHOUGH JESUS DID SAY THE GREATEST COMMANDMENTS ARE ABOUT LOVE—TO LOVE GOD AND NEIGHBOR—HE DID NOT MAKE THIS UP!**

#### **Both come from the Torah (Pentateuch)**

Leviticus 19:18 says:            *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*

Deuteronomy 6:4 says:        *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*

In later Jewish practice, this passage from Deuteronomy became a prayer called the *Shema* ("Hear"), and is still **recited daily** by many Jews today.

#### **Love of God and neighbor have been cited by Jews (both before Jesus' lifetime and since) as central / key teaching in the Torah.**

One famous instance comes from the life of Hillel the Elder, one of the most revered sages, who lived during the first century BCE. A gentile who wished to convert approached Hillel and challenged him to teach the whole Torah while he (the gentile) stood on one foot. Hillel said to him,

*"That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and study it."* (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a)

If this sounds familiar to you, it may be because the New Testament records a very similar encounter Jesus had roughly half a century later (Matt. 22:37-40).

---

Handout prepared by Eva Mroczek (Mar 2021) with sources suggested by Matt Rindge, Ethan Schwartz, M Adryael Tong, and Meredith Warren, in collaboration with James Barker, Chance Bonar, Adam DJ Brett, Aaron Brody, Greg Carey, Julie Deluty, Angela Roskop Erisman, Chaya Halberstam, Diane Fruchtman Hannah, Martin Kavka, Sarah Kleeb, Barbara Krawcowicz, Lennart Lehnhaus, Shelly Matthews, Kelly Murphy, Sara Parks, Elliot Ratzman, Annette Yoshiko Reed, Kelsie Rodenbiker, Larry Wills. Special thanks to Mika Ahuvia for "Us vs. them: Challenging stereotypes about Judaism in the wake of the Pittsburgh shooting", *Stroum Center for Jewish Studies* (1 Nov 2018)

Minor edits & formatting changes by Katie Turner (2023)