

CHAPTER THREE

What Does the Old Testament Say About God?

Nowhere is the distance between the Bible and its modern Christian readers more apparent than in what the Old Testament says about God. In an age that has witnessed two world wars and many regional conflicts, genocides and mass murders, terrorism and violence, and the destruction effected by two atomic bombs, all sane people recoil at the specter of the human suffering brought about by conflicts between people, thus the Old Testament image of God as a warrior appears not merely as a relic of another age but as a perversion of the Christian message. Equally difficult for some is Jesus' addressing God as father. Though it uses the imagery of intimacy, it also shaped the New Testament's image of God in almost exclusively masculine terms, leaving women to wonder how they reflect the "image and likeness of God." The Bible also speaks of a God who is both near and far, close and distant, and who is the only source of hope. What then are readers today to think of the God of the Bible?

Yahweh Sabaoth

A good place to begin is with the name “Yahweh”—the proper name of ancient Israel’s patron deity. Every one of ancient Israel’s neighbors had its own national god: the Philistines had Dagon, the Moabites Chemosh, and the Babylonians Marduk. Israel’s God had to have a proper name to help the Israelites distinguish their God from the gods of their neighbors. Israel’s basic confession of faith in their God calls this God by name:

Listen, Israel: Yahweh our God is the one, the only
Yahweh. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

The meaning of the name Yahweh is not absolutely clear, though the name probably was meant to evoke God’s power and presence.

The people of Israel acclaimed Yahweh whom they remembered as the God who freed them from slavery in Egypt and gave them a land (Deuteronomy 26:5–10). The name Yahweh was sometimes associated with another word to make a fuller title. One of the most frequently used and most problematic of these compound names is “Yahweh Sabaoth,” commonly translated as “the Lord of Hosts.” The “hosts” are the heavenly and earthly armies that Israel’s God uses to protect it. It is possible to translate “Yahweh Sabaoth” as “militant Yahweh,” for the title envisions God as a divine warrior. The significance of this title becomes clear in the stories about Israel’s wars with the Philistines, with whom Israel was contending for dominance in Canaan. After a stinging defeat the Israelites, at the direction of the elders, brought the ark of the covenant on which Yahweh Sabaoth was

enthroned from Shiloh to their camp (1 Samuel 4:4). The purpose of this act was to bring Yahweh's power into play on Israel's side (the effort was ultimately unsuccessful, however). In another story, the young David addresses Goliath: "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts [Yahweh Sabaoth], the God of the armies of Israel" (1 Samuel 17:45).

Though this title occurs over 250 times in the books of the Old Testament, it is unevenly distributed among these books. For example, it never appears in the Pentateuch. It occurs fifty-three times in the fourteen chapters of Zechariah but not at all in the much longer book of Ezekiel. The distribution is sometimes uneven within individual books. "Yahweh Sabaoth" occurs fifty-six times in Isaiah 1 through 39, but only six times in Isaiah 40 through 55 and not at all in Isaiah 56 through 66. This shows that ancient Israel used this title for God when it was necessary to affirm that God was victorious over the forces arrayed against Israel. This title, then, is not a description of divinity as much as it is an act of faith in Israel's future—a future that was under almost a continuous threat from political and military powers in the ancient Near East.

Does the militancy implicit in this title suggest that the people of ancient Israel understood their God as engaging in violence and commanding violence against Israel's enemies? Does this mean that the Bible makes violent retribution a divine prerogative, or that God approves of violence done in God's name? Certainly violence pervades the Bible from beginning to end: God virtually destroys the created

world in a great flood because of human wickedness (Genesis 6:5). The books of Joshua and Judges have the Israelite armies slaughtering the indigenous population of Canaan as an act of devotion to God (see Joshua 6:17). The book of Maccabees approves the killing of unfaithful Jews and the making of war against the armies of Antiochus IV (1 Maccabees 2:15–28). Even women take up the sword. Deborah encourages Barak and the armies of several tribes to fight against the Canaanites (Judges 4–5), and Judith kills an enemy general with her own hand (Judges 13:6–9). Jesus too resorts to violence as he “cleanses” the temple (Matthew 21:12–17). In the parable of the wicked tenants, Jesus implies that God will answer violence with violence (Matthew 21:33–43). The final act in the Last Judgment will be the casting of those not found in the book of life into the “lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14).

The world that witnessed the production of the Bible was a world of violence. The Israelite tribes emerged in the central highlands of Canaan in a time of significant upheaval throughout the eastern Mediterranean world. Saul, Israel’s first king, committed suicide after his army suffered a terrible defeat. Several of his successors in both Judah and Israel were assassinated. One died by his own hand; another died in battle and two died in exile. The Assyrians dismembered the kingdom of Israel and absorbed its territory into their provincial system. The Babylonians did the same to the kingdom of Judah and took many of Judah’s leadership class into exile. The Persians allowed Jewish exiles to return, but Judah was reduced to the city of Jerusalem and its immediate environs. The Greeks replaced the Persians. Though the

Maccabees led a successful revolution against Greek rule, Judah's real independence lasted for about eighty years before Rome brought Judah into its orbit. The Romans mistakenly believed that Jesus constituted a threat to their rule and so executed him. The first Christian community was harassed by a small clique of Jews who were offended by their assertions about Jesus (Acts 8:5). Some early Christian leaders were executed for their testimony (Acts 7; 12:2). It was not long before most Christians had to live in fear. Portions of the New Testament were written to encourage Christians who were persecuted because of their belief in Jesus.

The Bible could not ignore the agrarian experience of its people, thus it could not ignore the violence that was also part of their experience. Just as the prophet identified Yahweh as the one who gave Israel "the grain, the new wine and the oil" (Hosea 2:8), so it was natural to identify Yahweh as the Lord of Israel's armies, who drove out the nations from the land. Just as the nations had their gods who fought for them, so Israel had its patron deity: Yahweh. For the people of antiquity, nothing happened by chance—all was the result of actions by the gods.

By the time the New Testament was written, the territory of the former Israelite kingdoms had been occupied by foreign invaders for eight hundred years—except for the time of an independent Jewish kingdom following the Maccabean revolt (142–63 B.C.). The occupation was often brutal and debilitating. Some Jews came to believe that this world was not to witness the triumph of divine justice. There was to be

one final conflict between God and the powers of evil in which God will emerge completely victorious. This is the worldview of the New Testament generally and of the book of Revelation in particular. God's final and decisive victory will take place at the end of the age when God will utterly defeat all the powers of evil.

A serious theological problem may arise for the readers of Joshua, Judges, Revelation and other biblical texts that describe acts of violence done in the name of or at the behest of God. Often readers detach these stories from the lived experience that gave them shape. Two consequences commonly follow from such readings. Evangelical and conservative readers assume that God not only permits war and the human suffering associated with it but, at times, requires believers to take up arms. For example, during the American Civil War most soldiers on both sides were sincere Christians who believed that they were doing God's bidding: for the armies of the North, the war became a crusade to free the slaves; for the soldiers from the South, it was a crusade to preserve God-given rights.

In our day, among the most vocal opponents of nuclear disarmament are conservative Christians who see the West locked in a battle with non-Christian forces intent on destroying Christian civilization. On the other hand, more liberal Christians oppose war, and many consider the biblical stories about the wars of ancient Israel as examples of a primitive and unsophisticated religion whose perspectives are not only irrelevant but dangerous today. The Bible's attitude toward war and violence undercuts the whole of its moral

vision that appears to be too closely tied to the experience of another age.

The Roman Catholic liturgy uses the phrase “Yahweh Sabaoth” in the acclamation following the preface to the Eucharistic Prayer. That acclamation begins with a paraphrase of Isaiah 6:3: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts [Yahweh Sabaoth]; the whole earth is full of his glory.” Isaiah 6 recounts the prophet’s vision of God in the Jerusalem temple where God was worshiped as Yahweh Sabaoth. That title served to underscore Yahweh’s “power and might” as the patron deity of the Judahite national state. The contemporary Christian use of this title carries with it none of the political overtones that were characteristic of its use in the worship of the temple. Today the implication of the title’s usage centers on God’s cosmic power as Creator—an emphasis also present in many of the Old Testament passages that speak of Israel’s God as Yahweh Sabaoth.

The use of the phrase “Lord God of power and might” in the liturgy is a point of contact with our ancestors in the faith who worshiped their God using the very same title. At some time, however, the ancient Israelites stopped pronouncing the name Yahweh and began to use titles and circumlocutions in referring to their God. The precise time this happened and the circumstances that led to it are unclear, but by Jesus’ day the Jews held the proper name of their God in such reverential awe that this name was uttered only once each year by the high priest who entered the most sacred part of the temple to intercede for his people on the Day of Atonement.

In reading the biblical text or using biblical prayers, it became customary among the Jews to substitute the Hebrew word *Adonai* (Lord) for *Yahweh*. To insure that the divine name would not be spoken even by mistake, scribes who copied the sacred text attached the vowels for *adonai* to the consonants of *Yahweh*. (Those who produced the King James Version of the Bible in the early seventeenth century were unaware of this and rendered the divine name as *Jehovah*, which is certainly not the way the divine name was pronounced!) It has become customary in most Christian Bibles to use the word *Lord* in small capitals—LORD—whenever the Hebrew text has the divine name. This is to respect the sensitivity of religious Jews regarding the custom of never pronouncing God’s name. The editors of the *Jerusalem Bible* chose not to follow this practice; however, in the preface to their translation, the editors advise readers to make the customary substitution whenever reading the text aloud. Unfortunately, some Catholics have not followed this advice and the use of the divine name has crept into usage not only in public reading but also in contemporary hymns. Respect for traditional Jewish practice suggests that Christians ought to avoid pronouncing the Name of God. The customs of Judaism regarding the divine name are a rebuke to any Christian who does not show proper reverence in speaking about God or in using God’s name or the name of Jesus.

The God of Peace

Of course, the Bible’s moral vision also embraces reconciliation and peace. Some of most stirring words and engaging images engender thoughts of peace:

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
(Isaiah 9:6)

He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall sit under their own vines and under their
own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.
(Micah 4:3–4)

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the
heavenly host praising God and saying,
“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”
(Luke 2:13–14)

The psalmist encourages Yahweh’s worshipers, “Depart from
evil, and do good; / seek peace, and pursue it” (Psalm
34:14). Believers will look forward to the one who will

proclaim peace: “Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace!” (Nahum 1:15).

The word “peace” appears in almost every book of the New Testament. Certainly the teaching and practice of Jesus lie behind this usage. Jesus dismissed those he had healed with the words “Go in peace” (see Mark 5:34), and he wished his followers to live in peace with each other (Mark 9:50). Peace is Jesus’ parting gift to his disciples (John 14:27). Still, peace involves more than an absence of conflict: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). Jesus’ claim of absolute loyalty will create divisions within families where peace should reign. The disciple’s commitment to Jesus takes precedence even over the sacred commitments that family members have to each other. Jesus wished that every disciple be known as a “child of peace” (see Luke 10:6), and the epistles, too, emphasize that peacemaking is to be among the first priorities of Jesus’ disciples (Romans 12:18; 14:19; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 3:11). Peacemaking is at the heart of the biblical tradition. The Bible offers no higher calling to the believer than to be a “child of peace.”

Our Father

The prayer Jesus taught presents an even more intimate view of God. In what has become known as “the Lord’s Prayer” (Matthew 6:9–13), Jesus has his disciples address God as “Father,” just as he does. This usage suggests a closeness that characterizes the believers’ relationship with God, but it also led to the New Testament’s almost exclusive use of masculine images in speaking about God. The exceptions are in

Luke's Gospel: the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10), the parable of the yeast (Luke 13:20–21) and the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:2–8). The New Testament's reliance on masculine imagery to speak of God has led to a similar reliance in contemporary Christian worship. An increasing number of believers today find the exclusive use of masculine metaphors in addressing or speaking about God to be troublesome. They feel that this impoverishes the language of prayer and theology. What are we to make of the Bible's almost exclusive reliance on male language in speaking about God? Many Catholics suggest that in speaking and writing and especially in the liturgy, we use non-gender specific language when referring to God. How does this jibe with the biblical witness? If Jesus speaks about God as "father," doesn't this settle the issue? How can we legitimately speak of God as "mother"?

The people of ancient Israel thought of Yahweh as a male deity though the Old Testament does occasionally use feminine imagery in speaking about God. The Isaianic tradition portrays God as a mother (Isaiah 42:14; 49:15; 66:12b–13). That same tradition also addresses God as father (Isaiah 63:16; 64:8). Psalm 2 speaks of Judah's king as God's son. The notion that God was the father of Israel is commonplace in the Bible (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 14:1; 32:6; Hosea 11:1; Jeremiah 3:4, 19; 31:9; Psalm 103:13). But for the most part, the Hebrew Bible uses other images to suggest the intimacy between God and the worshiper. The prophet Hosea suggests that God's love for Israel is like that of a husband for his wife (Hosea 3:1).