

Is the God of the Old Testament also the God of the New Testament? There can only be one immediate response: of course not. The God who commanded the Israelites as they entered the Promised Land to destroy all the native inhabitants cannot be the same as the God of Jesus Christ, who (as St Paul put it) for our sake became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich, and who through that same Jesus Christ commanded us to love our enemies. This is obvious to almost all Christians, and it leads to a very general dislike of the Old Testament. The novelist A. S. Byatt puts it like this

I'm sure all those Scripture stories we did at the age of nine and ten are the reason I find religion not only incredible, but disgusting and dangerous. At that stage, you're already doing bits of Shakespeare, at least at the kind of segregated high-powered school I was at, and even if you say, or believe, you're bored or indifferent, there are all those passionate people, all those complicated motives, all that singing language, all the power, and, later, you know it changed you for ever. But the Scriptures were both dead and nasty.

And there's not much doubt it is Old Testament stories she's thinking of here, not, say, the parables of Jesus. Being an Old Testament specialist, as I and your chaplain both are, one is assumed to want to defend all those nasty stories, but of course most of us at least don't.

The problem with this gut reaction is that in other ways the God of the Old Testament is like the God of the New Testament. Our Psalm and readings tonight breathe the atmosphere of New Testament religion: 'With thee is the well of life, and in thy light we shall see light', says Ps. 36. Lamentations says, 'The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end, great is your faithfulness; the Lord is good to those who wait for him. For the Lord will not reject for ever; he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.' And in the early church it was felt to be essential to defend the Old Testament, because it had obviously been the Scriptures to which Jesus and the apostles appealed as authoritative, and its God was the God Jesus worshipped. There were those in the church who argued that the God of the Old Testament was a God who had created a bad world in his anger, but in Jesus a good God had delivered us from him, and that we should worship the second, good God, not the first, evil one. But the church roundly condemned this as a heresy, indeed it was the first heresy ever to be condemned. It seemed essential not to reject the God of the Old Testament on the grounds that the God of Jesus was a different and better God.

It seems to me that there is only really one way of dealing with both the identity of and the discrepancy between Old and New Testament pictures of

God, and that is to say that there was a development in the way the one God, whom both Testaments acknowledge, was conceptualized – an idea that used to go by the name of progressive revelation. It wasn't a simple evolution: the ideas of God's love and faithfulness and beauty, that are there in this evening's Psalm and Old Testament reading, were not necessarily later than the idea of him as the scourge of the native peoples of the Promised Land, and for that matter there is plenty about God as an avenging judge in the New Testament, not least in the book of Revelation, whose status as Scripture has sometimes been challenged – it was for example by Martin Luther, though he wasn't averse to a bit of vengeance himself at times. But taken by and large we can say that the way God is thought about by the mainstream of New Testament writers, and of course above all by Jesus himself, is an advance on much of what we encounter in the Old Testament. No one in Old Testament times arrived at the idea that one who, as St Paul puts it in Philippians, was 'in the form of God, did not think equality with God was a licence to grasp at power, but rather emptied himself, and took on the form of a slave, and was made in the likeness of human beings': the whole idea that God was incarnate, as we say, that is, took human flesh and blood, in Jesus Christ is not a notion anyone in the Old Testament had or could have had. But such a notion implies a big shift in the idea of what God himself is ultimately like. Archbishop Michael Ramsey put it in these words, "God is Christlike, and in him there is no unChristlikeness at all.' If that is so, then Christians know more about God than anyone in the Old Testament even claimed to know; and when we read the Old Testament, we do so not only to learn from the writers things they do indeed have to teach, but also to correct what they teach in the light of God's self-revelation through Jesus.

The Letter to the Hebrews begins by saying that God spoke in various ways to our ancestors through the prophets, but in these latter days he has spoken to us by his Son; and what the Son teaches trumps what the older revelation contained, even though it builds on it and could not exist without it. Without the Old Testament the Jewish people, and hence Jesus himself, would not have known that there was only one God; that he loved the human race; that he was the creator of everything that exists; that his creation was good (not bad, as those early heretics believed). For all this the Old Testament was – and is – indispensable. But what Jesus taught us by his preaching and by his life, death, and resurrection surpasses anything that had previously been realized about the true character of God, revealing him as one who was prepared to get involved in his creation and to be subject to the whims of the very people he had created, to the point of being willing to die in pursuit of his mission to reveal the love and unfailing mercy of God. The message of Jesus goes beyond anything in the Old Testament, and as Christians we have to read the Old Testament in its light, and be willing to criticise and even reject elements that do not live up to what he has taught us.

Now the problem this raises in the modern world is that it sounds very like what both Christians and Jews have learned to call supersessionism: the idea that Christianity has taken over from Judaism, and therefore the Jewish faith has no longer any right to exist, a terrible doctrine which has been used to justify Christian persecution of the Jews, an anti-Semitic doctrine into which Christians should very much fear to fall. To say that Christians have ideas about God which surpass what is in the Old Testament does not seem to me anti-Semitic, especially as we must immediately add that Christians have almost universally failed to live up to them: anyone who thinks the New Testament justifies being anti-Semitic has not read the New Testament, let alone the Old. But there is no doubt that Christian discourse about the Old Testament has sometimes been anti-Judaism (thinking of Judaism as a set of beliefs rather than as a people), and the Letter to the Hebrews is a major offender, claiming that in Christ a new covenant is made between God and Christians which renders the covenant with the Jews obsolete. The earliest Christians said, on the contrary, that God in his mercy had graciously included non-Jewish Christians in his covenant: it was an absolute given that he had chosen the Jewish people, and Christians were getting into the kingdom of heaven on their coat tails, which puts us more properly in our place as latecomers. To be loyal to our Christian calling we are bound to say that something great and new has been shown us; we are not bound, indeed we are bound not, to say that God has rejected the Jewish people: as St Paul says in Romans, 'Has God rejected his people whom he called? By no means!'

In any case, Judaism is not the same thing as the Old Testament. Jews like Christians have long recognized the moral problems in the Old Testament, and also believe that God continued to reveal more of himself long after it was finished, in the light of which the Old Testament itself can be criticised and improved on. Christians have the New Testament to correct the Old; Jews have the rabbinic traditions found in the Mishnah and the Talmud to point the way to a merciful and theologically sophisticated reading of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, as we should call it in that context. Both Christianity and Judaism have moved on from the Old Testament, and neither should be tarred with the brush of the cruelties there are in the old Scriptures – which in any case are far less prominent than A. S. Byatt, for example, believes. Neither Christianity nor Judaism is simply a scriptural religion; both have developed far more sophisticated theologies than you would think if you simply read their scriptures, and those scriptures need to be read in the light of what both religions believe and practise now. There is a huge overlap in the way God is conceptualized in Judaism and in Christianity, such that there is room for an enormously fruitful dialogue, and in neither are the vengeful bits of the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures read, as it were, neat, but in the light of later reflection. And both could, I believe, affirm with St Paul, in our second reading, that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God, whether we see that expressed in Jesus, as Christians do, or in the eternal will and teaching of God, the Torah, as do

Jews. In neither religion is the Old Testament determinative; but in both it contributes hugely to the understanding of the God who is mysterious and yet has chosen to make himself known to the human race.