

What about the God we read about in Exodus?

Introduction

This is the third of three papers, written on the subject of the Old Testament (OT). The first looked at the common ways in which the New Atheists tend to deal with the OT. The second focused more specifically on whether or not it is justifiable to treat the OT narratives as 'real history' - or (as liberal scholars and atheists tend to) as a religious myth, intended to convey some kind of spiritual message. I concluded that, where the OT authors speak about their history, and in particular about real places, real people and events that have generally been deemed to have occurred in broadly the form described, then it is reasonable to treat these narratives as historical. Clearly, there are other OT genre which are *not* intended to be read as 'history' (eg. Psalms, or Proverbs).

In this third paper, my intention is to spend a while looking at what we can learn about God from the Exodus narrative. Of particular interest is the contention that a God who acts in judgement against the Egyptians might be of questionable character, perhaps unworthy of our respect - and why we do not see such events occurring today. In practice, I intend to deal with these two considerations in reverse order.

The repeatability of events - or, Does God Always Do The Same Stuff?

At the heart of the Judaeo-Christian message is a divine Creator-being who is eternally the same, and therefore does not change. The seasons change. The universe changes (increasing in entropy). Our world changes (climate change, erosion, pollution). We change (the ageing process, and the experiences of life). Our relationships change. In many respects, living as we do in this kind of universe, the fact that God is consistently the same God, with the same attitudes towards us, standards and values, is an immense source of strength and confidence. We don't, for instance, have to engineer novel ways of endearing ourselves to him, because he is fickle and full of whims - Genesis through to Revelation tells us that he is a God of Grace, who delights to forgive, and always ready to receive those who genuinely turn to him.

So far so good. Does that mean, therefore, that God always acts in exactly the same kinds of way? The Exodus account does actually suggest some ways in which he does - for instance, Moses performs wonders in front of Pharaoh, in order to persuade him to let the Israelites go - and in the Gospel accounts, Jesus performs miracles in front of the multitudes (including the religious leaders who were utterly opposed to him), in order to set out his credentials and credibility. And that first Passover night (Exodus 12) involves the slaying of a lamb as an atonement for the sins of the Israelites, so that death would pass them by - whilst the New Testament (NT) shows us Christ as 'Lamb of God' (John 1:29) who would take away the sins of the world. Clearly, we are intended to see the continuity or parallels between these events, and draw the kind of significance that the biblical writers had in mind.

But then, on another level, God does *do* things differently. Isaiah 43:19 specifically tells us of God proclaiming that he is going to do "a new thing". Conversely, he is not hostage to repeating the same events, the same patterns ad nauseam: we have the Creation of the world in Genesis 1-3 - but we don't have a whole succession of new creations of that kind. In the New Testament, we have the resurrection and ascension of Christ presented - as a unique, one of a kind, phenomenon. Even Lazarus, or Jairus' daughter are simply raised from the dead to the same kind of life that they had before: one day, they will die as all of us must. But that's not the picture for Jesus. God has done a unique thing - in fact, a thing so radical, so unexpected that even Jesus' followers could not get their heads around it.

In fact, the Bible is quite clear about the fact that God may do *certain things* at *certain times* for *certain purposes*. One example is the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Levitical Law at the time of the Israelites entry into Canaan after their 40 years in the wilderness. There is an

utterly unique and strategic context for this - that the Jewish refugees are about to become a nation. They are given the tools of statehood to equip them for this new status - and there is never another occasion, throughout the OT, when this happens, as it were, as a kind of 'repeat'. They may rediscover the Law, after generations of neglect, but it is the same original Law which they then celebrate.

So, a reasonable conclusion we can draw about the events in Exodus: they have a unique historical and cultural context. We may not expect them to repeat in a similar way - but it is reasonable to study them in order to discern what significance they have for us.

God's character in Exodus

In tackling this subject, I am not attempting to argue that the OT accounts are always 'easy' to interrogate. They contain a lot that may make us uncomfortable. Sometimes the reason for this is that we may have little awareness of the historic-cultural context for the narrative, and therefore see God's actions as excessive. Sometimes, the reason is that we have such a lax view of sin, that it is incomprehensible to us that God might punish it severely. And sometimes, it may be because we are trying to put God into a nice neat little box, and we get frustrated because he won't fit.

Sometimes, it's helpful to be reminded of that quotation from C. S. Lewis:

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

— [C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*](#)

The context for the Exodus narrative is the oppression of God's people - previously given a home as refugees, and then (under a new ruler) dealt with increasingly harshly (Exodus 1:8-22). The new Pharaoh recognises that if you can eliminate male children, you will eventually solve the 'problem' of the Jewish presence in Egypt. It's not such a fantasy plot: the recent screening on BBC of 'The Eichmann Show', shows how (amongst other measures), the Nazis deliberately targeted Jewish children. Incidentally, there is nothing in this narrative which contravenes what we know of Egyptian history.

Exodus 2:23-25 tells us that God 'remembered' his covenant with Abraham, in the context of the Israelites cry for help in their suffering. But is that all he does?

Exodus 3 makes it clear that God is raising up Moses as an effective leader. He certainly isn't some kind of perfect, gifted solution, but God works patiently with him, reminds him of who *he* (God) is, and maps out in broad terms what's going to happen.

In Exodus 4, God helps Moses to understand the power available to him, *if* he will only trust him. He deals with the inevitable excuses and builds his confidence in what seems to be an impossible project. Later we see that the people of Israel themselves at last begin to rediscover the God that they *used* to know well, but had forgotten.

We learn a bundle of things about God. He keeps his promises. He doesn't forget us. He is prepared to deal with us, patiently and systematically, over time in order to lead us into a better place. He provides *sufficient proof*. He shares with us something of his nature (ie. he is not remote, hidden, uninvolved as Deism would have it).

And over the next few chapters, Pharaoh's going to learn a whole bundle of stuff about God too - and it all starts gently and innocuously, with Moses going to Pharaoh with a pretty modest request and Pharaoh stamping down on the Israelites. You can follow the developmental path in chapters 5 to 11, culminating in that final, and most awful 'plague', the death of the firstborn.

In a moment, we'll look at this one, but in the meantime let's just review the bigger picture. It is perhaps an obvious point, but God is under no obligation to deal with Pharaoh (or indeed anyone) in this careful, systematic, progressive way. After all, he's God, isn't he? The Israelites are a people under oppression, and Pharaoh is (by all accounts) a nasty piece of work. The persuasive message of Exodus is that God's unfolding judgement upon this nation, is something that is held back, and then is administered almost reluctantly and only once Pharaoh has used up all his chances.

The death of the firstborn

This is the final 'plague'. It's the final straw for Pharaoh who at last lets the Israelites go - although he has a change of heart later on, and heads off with his armies in hot pursuit. It's worth noting, in passing, that we have independent documentary evidence in support of incidental elements in the narrative such as in Exodus 11:2-3.

It is also worth noting that Sir Colin Humphreys, the Cambridge Physicist has provided a very solid, and scientific explanation for the first *nine* Plagues¹ - so although we are focusing particularly upon the last one, there is every reason for treating all ten as sober history, although we are now focusing on one which doesn't have any easy, 'natural' explanation.

It is on the night of this terrible final plague that God instructs the Israelites to inaugurate the 'Passover Feast', when judgement will pass by those homes where the lintel and doorposts of the houses have been daubed with lambs blood. This is a recapitulation of a theme previously suggested in the Bible: we may be sinful and deserving of judgement, and God may be just and inclined to visit with sin with justice, but he always provides a way out². In Exodus, the 'way out' is the sacrifice of the lamb, as evidenced by blood on the doorposts. In the NT, the 'way out' is through the sacrifice of God's "firstborn son", Jesus Christ. That terminology should give us cause to think about significance of this plague.

The terminology of "firstborn son" isn't, of course, used only to describe the victims of this final judgement - God uses the phrase earlier (Exodus 4:22-23) to describe the special relationship he has with Israel, and he makes the direct equation with Pharaoh's firstborn son. The King of Egypt has, as it were, fair warning - Pharaoh is to learn the hard way that God's love for *his* "firstborn son" far surpasses any love of any human parent for their child. The term itself could be used to describe the first child to be born, but more usually it designated one who was 'first in rank' or 'pre-eminent'. The "firstborn son" (irrespective of chronology) was the one upon whom all the privileges rested - in every sense of the term, God is making it clear how precious, and how loved his people are to him - the people that Pharaoh has been murdering and oppressing for so long.

There is no disguising the awfulness of this judgement upon Egypt. The text (Exodus 12:29-32) is quite clear about the matter. This is not something that the New Atheists might be able to label as 'genocide', but it is certainly an example of God coming with terrifying judgement upon a people. Unless one denies that the event actually happened, or perhaps tries to suggest that this is just a 'story', written to teach us something vague and amorphous about spirituality, one is still left with a narrative which is all about God dealing with human beings in the severest terms. There is little to be gained by equivocating, even if we had some reason to think that this may be a valid approach to take. At heart of the way we choose to respond to this, there are a cluster of considerations:

¹ 'Miracles of Exodus: a Scientist's Discovery of the Extraordinary Natural Causes of the Biblical Stories', HarperCollins, 2003.

² Genesis 22:8

- do we think that God actually has the moral right and status to 'judge' human beings?
- do we think that human beings are bad enough, or guilty enough, or corrupt enough to merit the kind of judgement that we read about in Exodus 12?
- do we think that the Exodus narrative shows us a God acting proportionately and carefully - or indiscriminately?
- do we view what happens in Exodus as a kind of isolated, standalone narrative, or (instead) part and parcel of a bigger, unfolding picture, showing how God is working through history to redeem people?

The terminology adopted here has its immediate application in suggesting the value equation between the love that God has for his people, and the love which Pharaoh naturally has for his own family. In the end, Pharaoh's motivation to treat the Israelites with great cruelty trumps his own natural affection for his family, or his care for his own subjects - God's self-revelation through the sequence of the Ten Plagues lays Pharaoh's real nature open to view.

But the terminology has a longer trajectory. The writer of Hebrews, in describing Christ, says "And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'"³ God's 'firstborn', the Messiah, is properly the object of worship - but people respond by nailing him up, as it were, to the lintels of a door. In a perverse way, the sinful nature of human beings is played out in this perversion of the Passover by which they were freed from oppression in Exodus.

The hardening of the heart

Repeatedly through the Exodus account, we encounter this kind of phrase: "But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go"⁴. This is an uncomfortable idea, and carries with it the suggestion that God is 'playing' Pharaoh, like a puppeteer does a marionette.

However, the Exodus narrative does present this phenomenon of 'hardening' in varying ways. In Exodus 7:13, we learn that Pharaoh's heart was simply hardened, and that he would not listen to Moses. Then in verse 13, we're told that it "remained hardened", as if the man's natural condition is being described to us. In Exodus 8:15, we're told that "he hardened his heart" (also v32), describing Pharaoh's own acts of self-will.

The combination of these descriptions suggests very strongly that God is not, somehow, forcing Pharaoh to be something that he is not. What he is, is an evil man, implacably opposed to God's people, a man with such a hard heart that he will not engage rationally with *nine* evidences of God's sovereignty, even when the consequences have been made clear to him from the outset. This is a man who will play fast and loose with his own succession, and the future of his people, such is his obsession with harming God's people. We do not need to struggle to imagine such people: the Armenian Genocide (1915) demonstrates it, if we are reluctant to cite examples such as Hitler.

However, there is something chilling about this aspect of the narrative. Pharaoh is being allowed to play out the consequences of his own depravity. God has chosen not to intervene in a redeeming way in his life - as he is doing with the Israelites. If for no other reason, we should not take lightly the hardness of our own hearts when God calls us to turn to him.

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³ Hebrews 1:6

⁴ Exodus 10:20