



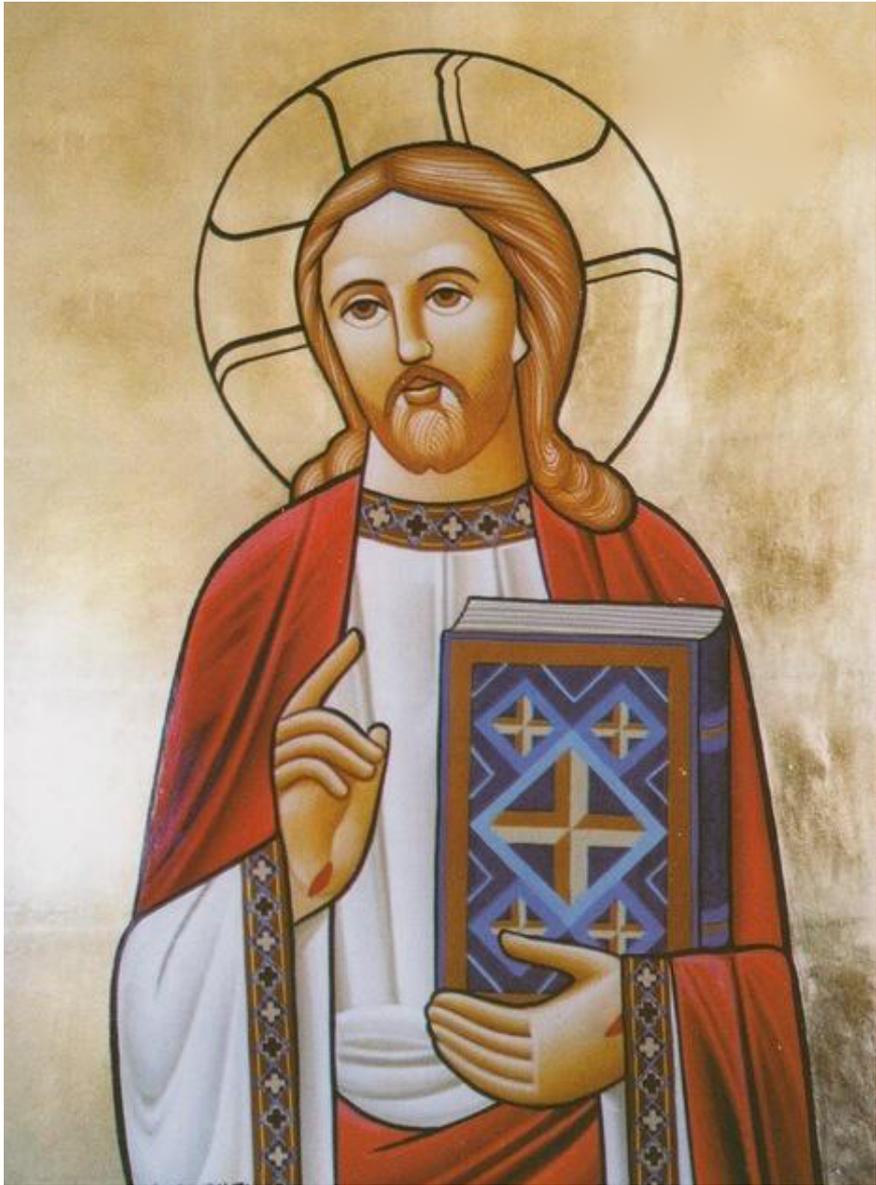
Flood, Plagues, Wars... and a Loving God?

Revision & Introduction by
HG Bishop Youssef

Father Gabriel Wissa



Flood, Plagues, Wars... and a Loving God?



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HH Pope Tawadros II

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General Distribution:

Fr. Gabriel Wissa

St. George & St. Joseph Coptic Orthodox Church

Email: fr_gabriel@stgj.ca

Phone: 1-514-994-0919

<http://www.stgj.ca>

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INTRODUCTION

by HG Bishop Youssef

When God created man in His own image He made him the ruler of the whole earth saying to him, “be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28). But this dominion over earth did not last long, as after his fall, Adam reaped many consequences of his disobedience among which was the rebelliousness of the earth: “Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you” (Genesis 3:17-18).

By time, as man’s corruption became progressive, the reaction of the earth to his evil became also more aggressive: “For the land is defiled; therefore I visit the punishment of its iniquity upon it, and the land vomits out its inhabitants” (Leviticus 18:25); “For all these abominations

the men of the land have done, who were before you, and thus the land is defiled, lest the land vomit you out also when you defile it, as it vomited out the nations that were before you” (Leviticus 18:27 28). On reading these verses one certainly asks, “How can the land vomit out its inhabitants, and what are the manifestations of such vomit?” The answer to this question is so simple. Floods, plagues, volcanoes, earthquakes, hurricanes and epidemics are nothing more than the manifestations that indicate that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).

It is then very clear that the loving God makes use of nature to beware man about the extent of his wickedness and to lead him to repentance. This is exactly what happened in Jonah’s story. But unfortunately, man’s reaction to such warnings was very weird. Instead of admitting his iniquities and taking charge of such catastrophes, he took many reactions. He started to worship nature offering many sacrifices to it in a trial to avoid its anger: “But all men are vain, who are not under the knowledge of God, and who from these good things that are seen, were not able to understand he who is, nor by paying attention to the works, did they acknowledge He who was the artisan. Instead they had considered either the fire, or the air, or the atmosphere, or the circle of stars, or

the sun and moon, to be the gods that rule the world. If they, being delighted by such sights, supposed them to be gods, let them know how great the Lord of them is in splendor. For He who created all things is the author of beauty. Or, if they wondered at their power and their effects, let them understand by these things that He who created them is mightier than they are” (Wisdom 13: 14). This reaction of worship was very clear in the story of the Philistines who took the ark of God. When God struck them with tumors, they thought to make a trespass offering in the form of “images of your tumors and images of your rats that ravage the land” (1Samuel 6:5).

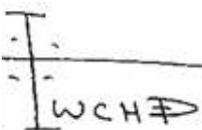
Another weird reaction was accusing God of being cruel, aggressive, and indictive: “He also kindled His wrath against me, and He counts me as one of His enemies” (Job 18:11). This accusation is in fact nothing more than projecting man’s own aggressive and hostile corruptive motives upon the almighty pure God. That is why God’s rebuke to Job and to all men in all generations is: “Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?” (Job 40:8).

We must know well that “the Lord is righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works” (Psalm 145:17). Notice the word “all” in this verse, which emphasizes well the comprehensiveness and the absoluteness of God’s love, righ-

teousness and mercies.

This book is written to emphasize this truth about God by removing any confusion about the exact real reasons lying behind the dilemmas that seem to be cruel and that puzzle man in all generations.

I pray God to bless its author, Father Gabriel Wissa, who, guided by the Holy Spirit, felt the importance of tackling such a confusing topic and made a great effort to explain and simplify some of the difficult passages of the Holy Bible. I also pray the Holy Spirit to enlighten the mind of every reader of this book, and to give him a deeper knowledge about the loving nature of the almighty God to whom is glory forever, Amen.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'WCH' followed by a stylized flourish or symbol.

Bishop Youssef

Bishop,

Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

INTRODUCTION

Saint Augustine, a 5th century saint, once said something very powerful: “*God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.*” We need to take a breath and reflect on this quote. If I were the only person on this planet, would the Almighty God, who controls this entire universe in the palm of His hands, have left His heavenly throne, where He is surrounded by the Cherubim (angels), make Himself of no reputation to be emptied of His power and take on a human body to bless my human nature and restore it from its sinful condition to its original image? The answer is yes! In addition, He would have endured the rejection, contempt, spitting, beatings, crown of thorns, and spear to His side and He would have been nailed to the cross and resurrected just for my sake. These words apply to each and every one, saint and murderer alike. Yes, even the murderer! How loving and compassionate is Our Redeemer? This Love is remarkably noticeable in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels, where one can only

imagine an All-Patient, All-Caring, All-Loving God who willingly gives His priceless life to us, His weak creation. On the other hand, a quick glimpse at the Old Testament could easily distort this image and lead some people to believe that the Old Testament God is a different and cruel God. How can the God that commands to give the other cheek allow for someone to be stoned because of a sin? How can God, who asks to bless those who curse us, allow the flood to annihilate the people whom He supposedly cares for? How is it possible that the same God who felt sympathy for the hungry five thousand men, in addition to their families, utterly destroy Sodom and Gomorrah in one night? It just makes no sense! There must be two different gods! At least that's what it seems like at first... However, if we think about it, it is impossible to have two gods, even from a logical point of view. Why, you ask? Simply because a true God must have some special attributes. He must be infinite, uncontainable, without limits. He must be everywhere. How can two gods be without limits?! If there were two gods, then they would automatically confine each other, which would mean that neither of them are gods. Therefore, logically, there can only be one God, and in spite of the violence in the Old Testament, He is an All-Loving and All-Caring God. How is it then that an All-Caring God would allow a flood, a destruction of an entire city, and so much violence? As difficult as these questions seem to be, they do have answers, and we hope to

shed light upon them in this book. Nonetheless, I will ask you to be patient with me, as there are no quick answers to these arduous questions. The lack of a brief answer is actually the main reason many people struggle to understand the Old Testament God. With the Grace of God, let's pray that He may open our eyes, illuminate our understanding and grant us to see His true delightful nature. Our God is a God of love, and He always was, is and will be forever and ever, Amen.

CHAPTER 1

God Is Love in the Old Testament Too!

The Concept of Free Will

Is the love of God obvious in the Old Testament? Yes, without a doubt! However, before exploring a few examples, allow me to explain one important concept that is fundamental to understanding Christianity as a whole, as well as the arguments presented in this book. Pick any relationship you have whether with your spouse, friend, or colleague. If you were the initiator and the one seeking the relationship, recall how much you wanted to please the other person with sweet words, gifts, or gentle acts of kindness. You sought to please the other, so he or she could also enjoy your company, want to spend more time with you, and thus, deepen the relationship. This is a very normal behavior, as the love of the other person

is not in your control, but in theirs; therefore, you sought to please the other. This free choice is a requirement for love. Love between two individuals can only be attained if both persons agree to love each other. In other words, you cannot compel someone to love you. It is the same with God. God is Love. He loves each one of us to the fullest, and He seeks a relationship with us. He seeks us to love Him back! Not because He needs our love, since His love is self-fulfilled in the Holy Trinity. It is actually quite the opposite; we are the ones who actually need His love. Therefore, God has given us the gift of choice, which is also known as *free will* whether to love Him or not. God cannot oblige me to love Him. He created me as a free being, not as a slave or a robot. It is through this free will that we choose whether we will follow Him, or stay away from Him. We all exercise our free will in diverse ways. Unfortunately, many opt to stay away from God and to break His commandments, like the Jews who were not willing to accept Christ: *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!”*¹ They fail to understand that the commandments are actually put as a fence for our protection, so we will not fall and destroy ourselves.

1 Luke 13:34 (NKJV)

They are a guide for our happiness, joy, and salvation. Many people misunderstand the purpose of the commandments thinking that God restricts their freedom. God doesn't restrict our freedom; however, He warns us of our choices. He tells us that there is a way that leads to life and happiness, and another that leads to death and grief. Since He wants us to live and be happy, He gives us these guidelines. Everyone is looking for happiness. God knows this very well, as He designed us, and He therefore guides us through these commandments, to the path of happiness. Everyone is also looking for love. A child, whether baby or toddler, searches for his mother's bosom for love and protection, a teenager is looking for acceptance from friends, a young adult seeks to be in a relationship, and a parent or grand-parent looks for love from his children and others. At every stage of our lives, we seek love. It is, in no way, a coincidence that God is Love. I am certain that the reader who has a real love relationship with God fully understands these last few lines. For others, it might still be a mystery, and I pray that it would be soon transformed to reality.

The People of Nineveh

Having explained the concept of *free will*, let's now take a few examples of God's love in the Old Testament starting with Jonah. We all know the story. To put it simply, the people of Nineveh did not live a godly life and were working towards their own destruction. God therefore sent them Jonah the Prophet to lead the people of Nineveh to repentance. *"And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left--and much livestock?"*² God says to Jonah. These people lived in sin and in ignorance, but God wanted to rescue them... This was Jonah's reason for escaping God in the first place; he knew that God would forgive them: *"Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm."*³ It is obvious from these verses that Jonah knew God very well, so well, that without a shadow of a doubt, he decided to escape Him because he was certain that He would forgive. If we dig deeper in the Old Testament, we will also come to the same conclusion.

2 Jonah 4:11 (NKJV)

3 Jonah 4:2 (NKJV)

From Sons of the Devil to Sons of Royalty

In Ezekiel 16, God showers His people with His love, although He knew of their past and future sins. The chapter starts with God talking to His people, the Jews, and says: *“Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. As for your nativity, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you; but you were thrown out into the open field, when you yourself were loathed on the day you were born.”*⁴ Before going any further, we need to understand the meaning of these verses. God is speaking to the Jewish nation and is telling them that their parents are of the Amorite and Hittite nations. These nations were very sinful. For example, they indulged in sexual immorality and went as far as to give their children as human sacrifices to their idol gods. Although the children of Israel were physically the sons and daughters of Abraham, in the above verses, God appointed these gentile nations as their parents to reveal their spiritual iniquity, which was formed due to their deviation from God’s

4 Ezekiel 16:3-5 (NKJV)

ways. They rejected God as their Father and accepted to be sons and daughters of the Devil. This problem with the Jewish nation persisted even in the time of Christ, as St. John the Beloved quotes Christ in the Gospel: *“If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this... You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him.”*⁵ The Jewish nation preferred Satan as their father rather than their sweet Creator. Of course we can safely assume that the Devil is a very bad father. Therefore, he doesn’t take care of the newborn child. He doesn’t cut the navel cord, doesn’t wash the baby in water, doesn’t rub him with salt (custom at the time), nor wrap him in a cloth. The child is left without pity or compassion. But God jumps in! *“And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ Yes, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’”*⁶ God saw them in their sin, but He desired that they may live, so He ordered it and started to shower them with His care: *“so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes,*

5 John 8:39-44 (NKJV)

6 Ezekiel 16:8-13 (NKJV)

I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine,” says the Lord God. “Then I washed you in water; yes, I thoroughly washed off your blood, and I anointed you with oil. I clothed you in embroidered cloth and gave you sandals of badger skin; I clothed you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your wrists, and a chain on your neck. And I put a jewel in your nose, earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate pastry of fine flour, honey, and oil. You were exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty.”⁷ God granted them to be washed with water (symbol of Baptism) and anointed them with oil (symbol of the Holy Spirit – through the Holy Chrism), clothed them with the best garments, adorned them with jewelry, and finally, made them royalty, kings and queens by inheritance. St. John Chrysostom says, “He, the great and mighty, was ready to have a harlot - the human nature - as His bride! Man would be condemned, if he covets a harlot. So, how could God choose a harlot to be His bride?! What did he do?! He did not send her an archangel, an angel, a cherub, or a seraph, but He descended Himself to approach to the one He loved... Because

7 Ezekiel 16:16 (NKJV)

*she was unable to ascend up to Him, He Himself came down to the harlot, and did not hesitate to hold her hand, drunk as she is...*⁸ How great is this love?! It is truly unconditional and above understanding.

Healing & Restoring – God’s Love Through Hosea the Prophet

Potentially, the ultimate example of God’s love in the Old Testament is expressed in the story of Hosea. Hosea is a prophet that wrote to the people of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, prior to its destruction in 722 BC by the Assyrians. During the time of Hosea, Israel had rejected the true living God and worshipped Baal, an idol god. The worship of Baal involved practicing sexual immorality and sacrificing their children in the fire to their god. They lived in sin and corruption: *“There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, Killing and stealing and committing adultery, They break all restraint, With bloodshed upon bloodshed.”*⁹ Priests or laymen, the corruption was at a very high level: *“Gilead is a city of evildoers, And defiled with blood. As bands of robbers lie in wait for a man, So the company of priests murder on the way to Shechem; Surely they*

8 Fr. Tadros Malaty, A Patristic Commentary – The Book of Ezekiel
9 Hosea 4:1-2 (NKJV)

*commit lewdness.*¹⁰ God, without a doubt, cannot stand to see His people that He loves and cherishes perish in this way. He wants to continue to embrace them as He did since the beginning: *“I taught Ephraim to walk, Taking them by their arms; But they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, With bands of love, And I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them.”*¹¹ Can you imagine God the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, the All-Present, the All-Knowing, taking care of us humans with such gentleness and love? He takes away our yokes and stoops down to feed us. What an awesome Father! In one of the fractions of the Divine Liturgy, we pray the following: *“We are the ones who sinned, and He is the One who suffered. We are the ones who were indebted to the divine justice because of our sins, and He was the One who paid off the debts on our behalf. For our sake, He preferred suffering over joy, toil over rest, contempt over glory, and The Cross over the throne which is carried by the Cherubim.”*¹² How magnificent are these words? They truly encompass God’s love for His people, whether in the Old or New Testament. The final message from God to Israel was very simple – re-

10 Hosea 6:8-9 (NKJV)

11 Hosea 11:2-4 (NKJV)

12 Divine Liturgy, O Only-Begotten Son Fraction, suscopts, Coptic Reader

turn to me for I love you: *“O Israel, return to the Lord your God, For you have stumbled because of your iniquity... Say to Him, “Take away all iniquity; Receive us graciously, For we will offer the sacrifices of our lips... For in You the fatherless finds mercy. I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, For My anger has turned away from him. I will be like the dew to Israel; He shall grow like the lily, And lengthen his roots like Lebanon. His branches shall spread; His beauty shall be like an olive tree, And his fragrance like Lebanon.”*¹³ Even after all their sins, if Israel confesses, God will gladly and mercifully accept them, heal them, love them and provide for them.

What Do the Closest People to God Have to Say About Him?

When Moses ascended for the second time to receive the 10 commandments written with the finger of God, God proclaimed about Himself and said: *“The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the chil-*

13 Hosea 14:1-6 (NKJV)

dren and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."¹⁴ Many misinterpret the verse thinking that God will punish people for their sin up to the third or fourth generation. This is incorrect. Our loving God is saying here that He will be patient with the sin of the current generation until the great grandchildren, and He will still forgive them if they repent. However, if they continue in the sin of their fathers, they will be chastised for the sake of the greater good – eternal life through repentance. Many people tend to look at the second part of this verse and complain about God, while they fail to see His goodness when He proclaims that He is merciful, gracious, and forgiving. Many similar verses are scattered throughout the Old Testament by the people that really knew God intimately. The deeper the relationship is between two people, the more they know and understand each other. Nobody understands the husband better than his wife and vice-versa. In the same way, the closer a person is to God, the better he understands Him, the better he sees His unconditional love. People like Nehemiah: *"But You are God, Ready to pardon, Gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, Abundant in kindness..."*¹⁵ or King David: *"The Lord executes righteousness And justice for all who are oppressed. He made known*

14 Exodus 34:6-7 (NKJV)

15 Nehemiah 9:17 (NKJV)

*His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.*¹⁶ When the Bible talks about God's anger or wrath, it is speaking in a figurative sense. We will discuss this in more details, later in this chapter. In addition, God portrays Himself many times as a loving and patient God. Here's one example: *"That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the Lord.*¹⁷

Love Is the Foundation of the Old Testament

Not only does God show obvious care for His people throughout the Bible, but His entire law is founded on Love. When Christ was asked which commandment is the greatest, He responded with the following: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."¹⁸ All the law and the prophets hang on these commandments of Love! Love God with your heart as He has loved

16 Psalms 103:6-8 (NKJV)

17 Jeremiah 9:24 (NKJV)

18 Matthew 22:37-40 (NKJV)

you with all His heart. In other words, the entire Old Testament would be scrapped if God was anything else but Love. Love turns out to be the foundation of the Old Testament. The reader can rest assured that the Person in control of our lives is the Dearest, Most Affectionate, Tender, and Devoted Friend we will ever have. Understanding this fact is the groundwork to comprehending the Old Testament.

No News Is Good News

If Love is truly the foundation of the Old Testament, the question that automatically arises is: What about the many references of war, violence, and punishments? Every few chapters, we seem to come across a challenging situation, and we are often puzzled by the decisions God took at the time. Can a Loving God be that impatient? Or is it a lack of understanding from our part? Before tackling this question, I will ask you a different one: nowadays, when you watch or read the daily NEWS, are the headlines mainly positive or negative? And to what proportion? I believe it is safe to say that the headlines are mainly negative. Today's NEWS consists of a long list of murders, crimes, fires, wars, lies, allegations, corruptions, and the like. Similarly, looking at the Old Testament, while applying this NEWS principle, will lead us to a surprising conclusion. Although what I am about to portray is

not an exact science, in my personal opinion, it is nonetheless an argument that cannot be overlooked. The Old Testament contains 929 chapters (using only the scripture of the Masoretic (Hebrew) text for simplicity purposes). If we also exclude the first 12 chapters of Genesis which the content precedes the life of Abraham, we now count 917 chapters. Now let's calculate the number of years that comprise the events described in these chapters. Assuming that Abraham lived 2,000 years before Christ and that the last prophet Malachi lived approximately 400 years before the birth of the Messiah, that is a total 1,600 years. If we divide the number of chapters written by the time span of 1,600 years, we get an average slightly more than half a chapter per year. For the sake of simplifying the calculations, let's assume it is an average of one chapter per year. These calculations indicate that, on average, one chapter per year was written during the time span of the Old Testament. It is evident that very little was recorded from the entire history of the Jewish Bible. In fact, we can assume that God, through His servants, only recorded the critical events. There was no significant event worth describing in the remainder 364 days a year; therefore, we can generally assume it was the day-to-day life where everything is as usual. "No NEWS is good NEWS," as they say. Typically, we can assume that the usual days involved humankind sinning (as we do everyday), while God remained tolerant, patient and merciful for days,

weeks, months, years and decades! The fact that God's mercy was not sufficiently recorded in the Old Testament is by no means a reason to believe that He was not All-Loving. Thankfully, some examples of God's love were recorded, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter. As an illustration, if we would like to imagine the complete story of the Old Testament, let's suppose we add to the Old Testament one chapter per day where nothing critical was worth recording, where God was longsuffering with His creation. This would mean adding 364 days per year, times 1600 years, which equals 584,000 chapters which talk about God's patience and love. In this case, we would have 584,000 chapters talking about God's patient love (this is a big assumption), versus 929 chapters talking about violence (this last number assumes that the entire Old Testament is violent which is untrue). While we are going to explain the reason for the violence in the remainder of this book, the above numbers actually reconcile the attributes of God in the two Biblical Testaments and portray the correct image of the Unchangeable God.

God's Anger & Wrath

On a similar note, often, the stumbling block for some of us to understand God's Love in the Old Testament is the regular reference of His Anger or Wrath. It is difficult to imag-

ine the gentle God of the New Testament angry, why is He then so wrathful in the Old? The problem with this question is that we assume that the characteristics of God's anger are the same as those of human anger. In other words, an anger that is characterized by *“several negative qualities such as loss of self-control, rage, spite, recklessness, wounded pride or just plain bad temper.”*¹⁹ This is a wrong assumption. The reader needs to understand that the language of the Bible is adapted to the capacity of the human mind and is not to be taken literally in certain cases. In fact, God is incapable of getting angry as we do. Anger is sin. A perfect God cannot sin. God's anger is a righteous one. The words anger and wrath are displayed for us to understand that God is strongly displeased with sin. *“There's one thing that is worse than evil, and that is indifference to evil, to remain unmoved by wrongs done to people. God is not indifferent to evil. He is personally affected by what we do to others. When the Bible speaks of God's anger, it means that God is not indifferent to evil. It would be hard to worship a God who sits serenely by and is not affected when His children are abused or wronged.”*²⁰ *“God is love but we need to remember that the counterpart of His love is hatred*

19 Can a loving God be wrathful?, Fr. Anthony Coniaris, p20

20 Can a loving God be wrathful?, Fr. Anthony Coniaris, p24

to evil.”²¹ When a person rejects God by consistently committing sin, they choose to be separated from God. This is a very important point since many wonder: how can a loving God send people to hell? It is not God that sends people to hell, but people send themselves to hell. God wants us to be with Him in the Kingdom of Heaven: *“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”*²² However, some people make a conscience decision to go to hell! *“But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.”*²³ As mentioned in this verse, the people are storing up for themselves judgment because of their unrepentant heart and their daily choice to sin rather than to choose God. *“Heaven and hell are logical extensions of life on earth... In the words of Camus, “Life is the sum of all your choices” So, “Choose well: your choice is brief and yet eternal” (Elsa Winter)”*²⁴ Hell is the absence of God. There is suffering because God is not there. There is sorrow because everything that is good has one and only source: God.

21 Can a loving God be wrathful?, Fr. Anthony Coniaris, p26

22 Luke 12:32 (NKJV)

23 Romans 2:5-6 (ESV)

24 Can a loving God be wrathful?, Fr. Anthony Coniaris, p32

If you remove that source, you also have removed His gifts. God is Love, Hope, Peace, Laughter, Joy, Gentleness, Goodness, Patience, etc. Where God is not, these gifts are not. Hell is not a physical scorching fire that people suffer and burn in, as some people may believe. Unfortunately, even some Christians believe this. Hell is the absence of God and therefore there is pain and misery. The Biblical references to a fire in hell are not to be taken literally, but it is to be taken as an allegory to describe the pain that could be suffered due to His absence. Remember, we have been created in His image and likeness. We have been designed to find rest in Him. The creation without its Creator is like a plant without water, a car engine without oil, a solar system without its sun!

CHAPTER 2

The World Before Abraham

Understanding the People of the Old Testament

Before we can begin to understand the consequences and punishments God placed upon His people, we have to first understand the people themselves. In other words, if we discover their true identity, we will understand the seemingly harsh consequences that came upon them. We need to understand their character, their background, their belief, their mindset, etc. But how can we know these details? The only way is by examining their actions recorded in the Bible and secular historical sources. These different historical events will reveal the true color of God's people and their evolution throughout the centuries. Before starting we have to remember that

the Bible is a story of Salvation and of Love between God and Humankind. The Bible was not written with the purpose of answering all these questions about violence, wars and punishments; however, the Bible does offer a sincere explanation through some of its passages. We have to keep this point in mind to be able to go forward with our reasoning.

Cain & Abel

By the second generation, humanity already started to deteriorate with Cain, the son of Adam and Eve. Before Cain killed his brother Abel, we read in the Bible a peculiar phrase: *“And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.”* Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against

Abel his brother and killed him.”²⁵ The phrase “in the process of time” could simply mean that a transformation took place in Cain’s inner being. He was not the same person anymore. That change resulted in him killing his brother. Today, murder is considered the cruelest of offences by Christians and non-Christians alike. Unfortunately, that level of corruption was already implanted in humanity from the second generation.

Noah & the Flood

When God cursed Cain as a punishment for his wrongdoing, Cain was afraid that he might be killed by his brothers and sisters: *“And Cain said to the Lord, ‘My punishment is greater than I can bear! Surely You have driven me out this day from the face of the ground; I shall be hidden from Your face; I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth, and it will happen that anyone who finds me will kill me.’*”²⁶ God protected him by setting a mark on him. This verse also demonstrates that murdering was not a sin that was unthinkable by other humans at the time. Sin had already integrated humanity at a deep level. This is also apparent when Seth and his son Enosh were born: *“And Adam knew his wife*

25 Genesis 4:3-8 (NKJV)

26 Genesis 4:13-14 (NKJV)

again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed. And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enosh. Then men began to call on the name of the Lord.”²⁷ The sentence “Then men began to call on the name of the Lord” implies that everyone else, or almost, had completely abandoned the Lord. They had already cut themselves off from the Source of All-Goodness. We are not talking about people struggling in sin and trying to keep a relationship with God, we are talking about people that willingly deserted Him. Undeniably, it was now a matter of time before sheer disaster, and indeed, that is what followed: “*Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*”²⁸ Can you imagine a place where every intent of the heart of all humans is continually evil? I don’t think we can come close to visualize this foul scene. Think about it... There is so much evil in the world today: murders, wars, domestic violence, rapes, corruption, cheating, lying; in spite of this, there are still plenty of people doing God’s work every day. There are lots of people that live the commandments of God and are the light of the world because they are filled by His Spirit. Thus, by what

27 Genesis 4:25-26 (NKJV)

28 Genesis 6:5 (NKJV)

factor should we multiply the sins of today to understand the sins of early humanity? That is a very good question; but unfortunately it is a question without an answer. However, it is safe to say that the above demonstrates that our Loving-God, Who wanted to save fallen-humanity through the incarnation of His Only-Begotten Son had no other choice but to flood the earth from its corruption and restart anew.

The Reasons for Such a Severe Punishment

The reasons for the punishments are two-fold. First, we have to understand that God's plan was for Him to be incarnate in a human body to save humanity from eternal death and to bring back the corrupted human nature to its original state. As in His usual dealings with us, God, out of His love and the free will He has given us, always requests our participation in His work. In other words, God chooses to work through us: *"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us..."*²⁹ God can do exceedingly, abundantly, above all we can think of, but He decides to do it through humans, through the power that works in us; which is the Holy Spirit. For example, a person who requests, in prayer, God to

29 Ephesians 3:20 (NKJV)

send him money for this month's rent. God will answer the prayer, and the money will come. However, it will not come down from Heaven by miracle! You might get a check from a friend, assistance from church, or even from a total stranger. The money will come through God's people whom He leads through the Spirit. This concept is important to grasp for us to properly understand His nativity. For God to be incarnate in the flesh, He requested the participation of humanity through the Virgin Mary. When the blessed Archangel Gabriel visited St. Mary and declared to her the plan of the incarnation: "*Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.*"³⁰ The plan of the incarnation was complete when St. Mary accepted: "*Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.*"³¹ St. Mary accepted on behalf of humanity as St. Irenaeus (the second generation disciple of St. John the Beloved) clearly mentions in his writings: "*so also did Mary, having a man betrothed [to her], and being nev-*

30 Luke 1:30-33 (NKJV)

31 Luke 1:38 (NKJV)

*ertheless a virgin, by yielding obedience, become the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race.”*³² St. Athanasius also states: *“He [Christ] took our body, and not only so, but He took it directly from a spotless, stainless virgin, without the agency of human father...”*³³ Think about the world today, where sin is continually progressing from generation to generation without any signs of slowing down. Yet, as mentioned earlier, today’s world is actually very decent compared to the world at the time of Noah, where every intent of the heart of all humans was only evil continually. Without this new beginning through the flood, how would St. Mary have accepted the incarnation? Would she even exist? Would she be the same pure person who was willing to sacrifice her life to take care of the Son of God? No.

The second reason for the punishment is very clear. Let’s start with an example: if a man in some city in North America commits an act of murder, will the police let him go? Will the judge or court agree to his dismissal? That would be unimaginable. When a person commits a crime, he must stand the consequence of the crime. It would actually be unfair if the criminal was set free. In addition, if this unfortunate

32 Against Heresies, 3.22.4, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons

33 On the Incarnation, St- Athanasius, p 34

event would occur, everyone would cry out for justice. The same applies for the generation of Noah. Without a doubt, God is loving and compassionate with His creation and when the creation strays He is very patient with them: *“The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”*³⁴ Even prior to Abel’s sin, God fully warned him: *“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.”*³⁵ God foretells Cain that sin is near and the fact that God says “you should rule over it” naturally implies that God gave Cain the power to overrule the powers of evil; nevertheless the decision was Cain’s. To top it all off, out of His mercy, The Lord said: *“My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.”*³⁶ Here, God gave the people one hundred and twenty years to repent from their evil ways (that is the accurate understanding of this verse), but, once more, they continued in sin which lead towards their own destruction. After years of patience, this was God’s last shot at this generation. And how

34 2 Peter 3:9 (NKJV)

35 Genesis 4:7 (NKJV)

36 Genesis 6:3 (NKJV)

did they react to that final call to repentance? Christ gave us the answer Himself: *“For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.”*³⁷ The words “did not know” do not mean that the people did not know about the flood, but merely that they were caught by surprise because of their lack of attention. The people certainly knew about the flood since they saw Noah building the massive ark: *“The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. You shall make a window for the ark, and you shall finish it to a cubit from above; and set the door of the ark in its side. You shall make it with lower, second, and third decks.”*³⁸ How long is a cubit? It is not clear as there were many cubit measurements at the time; however, we know that the shortest cubit measurement at the time was 44.5 cm (17.5 inches), while the longer was 52.3 cm (20.6 inches). This makes the length of the boat between 133.5 and 156.9 meters. Even if we use the shortest measurement of a cubit, the ark’s size would be 133.5 meter long by 22.25 meter wide by 13.35 meter high. It is a noticeable size boat to say the

37 Matthew 24:38-39 (NKJV)

38 Genesis 6:15-16 (NKJV)

least, so they did know. Furthermore, the Bible does refer to Noah as “*a preacher of righteousness*”³⁹ It is then safe to assume that Noah declared to the people repentance of sins and advised them about the flood, yet not one of them seemed to be concerned. And just in case those one hundred and twenty years were not enough, God graciously added another seven days right before the flood: “*So Noah, with his sons, his wife, and his sons’ wives, went into the ark because of the waters of the flood... And it came to pass after seven days that the waters of the flood were on the earth.*”⁴⁰ This additional period of seven days truly demonstrates God’s compassion and His unwillingness for humankind to perish. Everyone was in the ark, the rain was about to pour and God was sending the last call but once more not a soul responded. As in the above example of the murderer, God had to settle accounts, after many years of longsuffering, with this evil generation. They suffered their punishment by their own will. We all have a choice to make: “*See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess.*”⁴¹

39 2 Peter 2:5 (NKJV)

40 Genesis 7:7&10 (NKJV)

41 Deuteronomy 30:15-16 (NKJV)

CHAPTER 3

The Time of the Patriarchs

The Call of Abraham

Many years after the flood, God was still seeking the salvation of mankind. He therefore revealed Himself to Abram, who God later named Abraham, to be the father of the Jewish nation. During the time of Abraham, most people had forgotten the true attributes of God, as they lost their connection with Him and were worshiping idols (statues), which they had built with their own hands. God thus proclaimed Himself to Abraham to lead humanity back to the worship of The One True God. In other words, God was shifting the people from their polytheistic beliefs back to the monotheistic truth by using His servant Abraham. Ultimately, God's promise to Abraham was for him to become the ancestor of the Messi-

ah, which occurred approximately 2,000 years later with the birth of Jesus Christ.

Abraham Offers Isaac

Perhaps one of the greatest faith stories ever told in history is attributed to our father Abraham. As you know, Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless and passed the age of reproduction when God announced to them that they would have a child. After waiting for Isaac a good 25 years, they finally had their beloved son, when, out of the blue, God came up with an unexpected request: *“Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”*⁴² As the story unfolds, Abraham obeyed and went up the mountain with Isaac who was carrying the wood for the offering, Abraham built an altar, prepared the wood, bound Isaac to the wood and was about to kill his only son that he loved and suddenly the Angel of the Lord called to him: *“‘Abraham, Abraham!’ So he said, ‘Here I am.’ And He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do*

42 Genesis 22:1-2 (NKJV)

anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”⁴³ God was testing Abraham and he indeed passed the test with flying colors! Although Abraham, here, showed amazing faith and has set for us a wonderful example of complete submission to God, this story is unfortunately sometimes misunderstood by some. How does a Loving God ask a father to sacrifice his child as a burnt offering? Is God advocating the killing of humans or worse innocent children? Why does God need to test Abraham, doesn't He know everything? These are the questions that come up and with God's grace, we shall tackle them.

Often God's requests seem quite strange for us living in the 21st century. This is due to our lack of knowledge of the different cultures in the Old Testament. Historically, offering one's child to the pagan gods was common. They did so in despair and fear of their blood-thirsty gods.⁴⁴ Remember, Abraham lived in a polytheistic society where the worship of pagan gods was the norm. Abraham had probably seen many people in his lifetime offering their children to these idols. Therefore, to Abraham, this request was not strange. However, the abnormal part is that God, the Lover of mankind,

43 Genesis 22:11-12 (NKJV)

44 Fr. Tadros Malaty, A Patristic Commentary – The Book of Genesis

was the One asking such a thing. But did Abraham really believe that God was requesting this human sacrifice? It seems that he knew Him a bit better than that. St. Paul says: *“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called,’ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.”*⁴⁵ This verse, which was inspired by the Holy Spirit, like the remainder of the Bible, reveals to us that Abraham concluded that God was able to raise Isaac up from the dead. In other words, since God had promised Abraham that his seed shall be called in Isaac (mentioned by name), and no other, he fully believed that God would simply prevent this from happening one way or another. Abraham had experienced Him for many years by then and his mind could not conceive that God would accept such a sacrifice.

As already explained, God likes to talk to us in ways we understand. He uses our daily practices to speak, teach and guide us. So how can a Loving God ask a father to sacrifice his child? Well, firstly, this request was a normal one at the time! Although it might seem outrageous to us, it was not to Abra-

45 Hebrews 11:17-19 (NKJV)

ham. Secondly, God was never going to allow it. In addition to the explanation provided by St. Paul above, the entire story in Genesis 22 starts with *“God tested Abraham”* and finishes with *“Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me...”* God tested Abraham and never had the intention of killing Isaac. God does not change His mind and the fact that He prevented Abraham from killing Isaac and provided a ram to be offered instead is the absolute demonstration of His Will. His Will was to test but never to kill. Therefore, God is not advocating human sacrifices but in fact, quite the opposite, as He mentioned in the Torah: *“You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they [gentiles] have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.”*⁴⁶ To associate this request with God’s Will is a serious oversight. His Will is clear as seen in the Torah, but He used the circumstances and the culture of the time to make of Abraham a pillar of faith. We need to be able to differentiate between the Will of God and the purpose of this episode.

If God knows all things beforehand, why does He need

46 Deuteronomy 12:31 (NKJV)

to test Abraham? Well, let's replace this question with another one: If God knows all things beforehand, why even live our lives on earth? Why not be created and then go to Heaven or Hell directly? It cannot be so as life would become meaningless. Focus with me as it is about to get a bit complicated. The key is to understand that the Foreknowledge of God does not cancel our free will and actions. In other words, although God knows my choice beforehand, I still need to choose it. The fact that God knows does not affect my choice. I am still free to choose. However, He simply knows what I will choose because He is above time. However, if I do not proceed with the choice, the outcomes of the choice will not transpire. Here's an example to clarify: imagine you have a driving exam. You purchased a book from a staff member that has 100 questions and she told you that the theoretical exam will include 10 questions from these 100. You studied very well and you know all the answers by heart. In this case, you have "foreknowledge" of the questions to come as you studied. But what would happen if you choose not to go to the exam after all? Would you get your license? No, because you did not proceed with your choice of going through with the exam. The fact that you "foreknew" the questions does not make you pass the exam. It is the same with Abraham. Although God foreknew the choice of Abraham, he still needed to accomplish it in order to demonstrate his faith and reap the blessings of obedience. That

is why St. James in his epistle says: *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God.”*⁴⁷ By works, faith was made perfect! If the works do not take place then my faith is ineffective.

Secondly, God used this event to proclaim Abraham’s faith to the world, as St. Augustine says: *“Abraham has been tested by offering his beloved son Isaac to proclaim his piety of obedience, not to God, but to the world.”*⁴⁸

Sodom & Gomorrah

During the time of the Patriarch Abraham, we shall look at another main incident that could be a stumbling block to many, which is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Some people are shocked by the idea that God would destroy a city with its entire people, including its children and its animals: *“Then the Lord rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord out of the heavens. So He*

47 James 2:21-23 (NKJV)

48 St. Augustine, City of God 16:32

*overthrew those cities, all the plain, all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.*⁴⁹ The usual reaction from skeptics is: how can you say that this is a loving God? And why would God also kill the innocent children? At a first glance, these questions seem rational, and God is the One who seems unreasonable; however, let's give God a chance here and examine the situation closely. As per the last chapter, we agreed that when someone has committed a crime, justice has to take place someday. No one with a decent conscience would keep a murderer or a serial-killer from being judged and imprisoned as deserved. In this situation, the Lord said: *“Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know.”*⁵⁰ It is obvious in this verse that the sin of these people is very grave in the sight of God and it is supported by the outcry that came to the Lord. It is unclear who the outcry comes from, whether angels, humans, or the creation in general; nevertheless, it is clear that the sin is grave enough, that not only is God displeased, but also the creation itself. Very simply put, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was at a despicable level. A

49 Genesis 19:24-25 (NKJV)

50 Genesis 18:20-21 (NKJV)

level of sin the remainder of the inhabitants of the earth had not experienced. This will become very obvious in the next few examples. The first example: “*Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground. And he said, “Here now, my lords, please turn in to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way.’ And they said, ‘No, but we will spend the night in the open square.’ But he insisted strongly; so they turned in to him and entered his house. Then he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.*”⁵¹ Here, Lot saw that these two angels, appearing as men, were new in the city. In fear from the evil that might come upon them, he strongly insisted that the men would not spend the night in the open square but in his house so he can protect them. Then, “*the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both old and young, all the people from every quarter, surrounded the house. And they called to Lot and said to him, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may know them carnally.*”⁵² All the people, both young and old men from every corner of the city charged Lot’s house

51 Genesis 19:1-3 (NKJV)

52 Genesis 19:4-5 (NKJV)

to openly sleep with the two men. Think about the meaning of this carefully. All men, young and old, regularly had relations with each other that when they saw fresh “meat”, they all, without hesitation, rushed to the house. *“So Lot went out to them through the doorway, shut the door behind him, and said, ‘Please, my brethren, do not do so wickedly! See now, I have two daughters who have not known a man; please, let me bring them out to you, and you may do to them as you wish; only do nothing to these men, since this is the reason they have come under the shadow of my roof.’ And they said, ‘Stand back!’ Then they said, ‘This one came in to stay here, and he keeps acting as a judge; now we will deal worse with you than with them.’ So they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near to break down the door.”*⁵³ I really don’t understand Lot’s judgment here by planning to swap his two virgin daughters for the two men to protect them, but what is even more shocking is the response of the people. They were offered two women instead of two men and it angered them! Their sin had attained such a sad level that women were not pleasing to them anymore. The level of sin of the men and women in Sodom and Gomorrah was serious (it would be unrealistic to assume that only men were at this stage and not the women). Their sin was complete. There was no turning back,

53 Genesis 19:6-9 (NKJV)

no room for repentance. It was time for justice. God loves His people very much and is very patient and compassionate, but He also abhors sin. He is perfectly just in His mercy and perfectly merciful in His justice, as the late Thrice Blessed Pope Shenouda III, former Coptic Orthodox Patriarch, would rightly state. After many years of patience, many attempts to intervene and lead to repentance, Sodom and Gomorrah still insisted on their wrongdoing. Let's not try to justify mankind and blame God; rather let's face the facts! God would only destroy cities like this when their sin was beyond repair. This is obvious from the Bible itself, as we shall see during the time of Moses. In this specific situation, God had promised Abraham, during their discussion in Genesis 18:20-33, that He wouldn't destroy the cities if He had found only ten righteous people. Unfortunately, the amount of righteous people couldn't even reach the meager number ten. The only family whose sin was not complete was Lot's. Even then, we find that Lot's wife and daughters had been severely affected by the immorality of the people.

What About the Children?

Ok, fine! But what about the innocent children? Skeptics argue. To answer this question, we have to understand that sin was so deep within these people that it had already deeply

affected the children. It is already a fact that children inherit bad habits from their parents, and the younger they encounter those habits, the higher the chances of inheriting them. When sin becomes this grave and profound, you know it is deep-rooted within the children. They would have grown-up to become like their parents. This is obvious in Genesis 19:4, where it is stated that both old and young men surrounded the house to have relations with the two angels. It is also apparent when the two daughters of Lot dealt irresponsibly with him and committed incest: *“Now the firstborn said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is no man on the earth to come in to us as is the custom of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve the lineage of our father.” So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose.”*⁵⁴ And so did the second daughter in Genesis 19:35-38. In the medical field, when a part of the body has cancer but it has not yet propagated to the remainder of the body, it is the duty of the physician to completely remove it and not leave a single trace. If he fails to do so, the state of the patient will further decline. However, the reader can rest assured that God is a loving and fair God. If any chil-

54 Genesis 19:31-33 (NKJV)

dren were truly innocent, then God will keep them a place in Heaven: where there is neither tear nor pain, where the sun is not because the Sun of Righteousness, God, shines with all His Glory. This was promised by Christ when he said, *“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.”*⁵⁵ Rather than God allowing them to suffer on Earth without parents, He grants them to enter the heavenly rest freely, without toiling in this harsh world. If the reader does not believe in Heaven, I would kindly suggest that you reconsider the possibility! If you search deep within you, you will find that you are seeking this profound hope, love, and joy. Be fair with yourself, search the Truth carefully, without bias, and you will find it. We all fear death because we are not meant to die. We were created as eternal beings and indeed, our souls will live forever, whether in eternal light or everlasting darkness. The choice is yours and mine.

God's Mercy with Lot

For the record, God's mercy is also evident in this story. When the angels told Lot to hurry because the city was about

55 Mark 10:14-15 (NKJV)

to be destroyed, for some reason Lot lingered. Possibly, he was having some doubts, or lingered because of his married daughters that were not willing to leave the city, or he wanted to gather some possessions, yet the Lord was merciful to Him: *“And while he lingered, the men took hold of his hand, his wife’s hand, and the hands of his two daughters, the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him out and set him outside the city.”*⁵⁶

56 Genesis 19:16 (NKJV)

CHAPTER 4

Moses, Pharaoh & the Ten Plagues

From Abraham to Moses

After Abraham responded to God's calling, God gave him Isaac as a son and Jacob as a grandson. God then blessed Jacob with twelve sons, of which Jacob preferred Joseph, the son of Rachel. Shortly after, there was a famine in the land, and the entire nation of Israel migrated to Egypt, the only place still left with food. By then, Joseph had become the right hand of Pharaoh and went on to be the leader of his people. Pharaoh loved Joseph and subsequently loved the nation of Israel. However, as time passed by, and Joseph and Pharaoh died, the circumstances of the Jewish nation changed quite a bit. They were not treasured anymore by the new leader of

the Egyptians, and Pharaoh went on to enslave the Jewish nation. In addition, Pharaoh, at that time, was troubled by the increasing number of Jews. This led him to command that any new baby boy be thrown into the river. As the story unfolds, Moses was born, was saved from death by a miracle and was raised in the Palace as Pharaoh's son. After living forty years as a Prince, Moses realized he was not really the son of Pharaoh, but an adopted Jew and therefore, escaped the luxurious life. Then, God prepared Moses for another forty years until he was ready to deliver the Jewish nation from the bondage they were in. Moses was at this point eighty years old. Israel had been suffering as slaves for approximately 400 years and God had now heard the cry of His people and had sent them Moses as their deliverer. However, the process of deliverance God used was not the simplest to say the least. It involved ten tough plagues that inflicted the Egyptians, including the destruction of their land through hail and fire, destruction of the livestock and eventually the death of the Egyptians' firstborns.

Was Pharaoh a Puppet in God's Hands?

Many people struggle to understand the intentions of God when He befell the ten plagues on the Egyptians in approximately 1,500 BC. I believe there are two parts to the struggle. The first part is that it seems that God is controlling

Pharaoh from above like a puppet to fulfill a certain plan of His: *“And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt. But Pharaoh will not heed you, so that I may lay My hand on Egypt and bring My armies and My people, the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand on Egypt and bring out the children of Israel from among them.”*⁵⁷ Why is God punishing Pharaoh if He is the One that is hardening his heart? That’s a very fair question, and we will get to the bottom of it God willing. The second part of the struggle is the destruction of the land through the plagues, the death of the Egyptians’ firstborns and also the death of Pharaoh. Was all of this really necessary? Could there have been another way for God to save His people?

Free Will Is Free Will

Like the verse cited above, there are a few verses in the story that seem to imply that God is hardening Pharaoh’s heart and therefore, controlling his actions. However, the reader should rest assured that God does not do such a thing. These verses mean that God has allowed for Pharaoh’s heart to be

57 Exodus 7:3-5 (NKJV)

hardened, but He did not harden it Himself. In other words, God permitted Pharaoh to harden his own heart, and He did not interfere. Actually, to be clear, it is not His desire to interfere in human's decisions. As explained earlier, God gave a free will to each individual, and He will not hinder nor restrict it. How would God judge Pharaoh if He Himself controlled Pharaoh's actions? It is not so. The truth appears when we compare all the verses that speak about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. In Exodus chapter 8, the Bible says, *"But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not heed them, as the LORD had said."*⁵⁸ And again, *"But Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also; neither would he let the people go."*⁵⁹ These two verses clearly demonstrate that Pharaoh is the one that hardened his own heart. When someone stubbornly insists on his own ways, God, after many trials, gives them up to their own desires.⁶⁰ So God did with Pharaoh.

Was All of This Really Necessary?

Why such destructive plagues? Why kill the firstborns of the families, and why kill Pharaoh? Well, let's see. When

58 Exodus 8:15 (NKJV)

59 Exodus 8:32 (NKJV)

60 Romans 1:24

Moses told Pharaoh to let his people go, Pharaoh's response was quite defiant: *"Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go."*⁶¹ So Pharaoh did not regard nor had any respect for God because he did not know Him. If Pharaoh did not know God, then on what basis will he let the people go? These Jewish slaves were building the country for him. The fate of the Israelites could only be changed if God intervenes with an external factor. But which factor could He use? As the story develops, the factor to be used is revealed. *"Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 'When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Show a miracle for yourselves,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast it before Pharaoh, and let it become a serpent.'"*⁶² This verse is important as it demonstrates that Pharaoh seeks miracles for him to believe the existence and power of God. Throughout the first three challenges between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians, we can see that Pharaoh was keen to have his magicians imitate the miracles done by God. First, he was reassured when the rods of his magicians transformed into serpents, like Aaron's rod and as a consequence, his heart grew hard.⁶³ Then, the

61 Exodus 5:2 (NKJV)

62 Exodus 7:8-9 (NKJV)

63 Exodus 7:11-13

magicians imitated Moses by also turning water into blood. And Pharaoh's heart grew hard again.⁶⁴ And finally when the magicians brought frogs out of the water just as Moses and Aaron did.⁶⁵ But this time, his reaction was different, as it is recorded that Pharaoh made supplication from the Lord that He may remove the frogs from the land and God did. Therefore, the only apparent criterion Pharaoh displayed to believe in the God of Israel was through His miracles. Unfortunately, even when he saw the first nine miracles, he still refused to let the people go. How much more would he have refused if there were no miracles? This need for the miracles became quite obvious when God brought the lice upon the Egyptians: *“Now the magicians so worked with their enchantments to bring forth lice, but they could not. So there were lice on man and beast. Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of God.’”*⁶⁶ Here, the magicians themselves confessed that this was the finger of God because they could not recreate the miracle. They confessed because they saw the plagues. So what other option did God have to free His people who were being oppressed day and night in slavery but to perform these miracles?

64 Exodus 7:22-23

65 Exodus 8:7

66 Exodus 8:18-19 (NKJV)

The Gods of Egypt

In addition, these plagues were not chosen randomly by God (nothing is random with God), but they had a very specific purpose. These plagues were all targeted at the gods of the Egyptians: “... *against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD.*”⁶⁷ From the worship of the Nile river (or the gods related to the Nile that could not defend it), to the frogs which were dedicated to the god Osiris, or the epidemic against the livestock, which the Egyptians believed were holy like the calf “Ebis” that supposedly contained the spirit of the god Osiris. The Egyptian gods failed to protect them from the extreme weather like hail and fire or from the locusts. Not to mention that they worshipped the sun, which they called “Ra”. Of course, their god was defeated by the thick darkness which lasted three days.⁶⁸

The Death of Pharaoh

As we know, the story ends with Pharaoh and his army drowning in the Red Sea. In reality, it is Pharaoh’s pride that led him to this tragic end, but why was he so stubborn? Why

67 Exodus 12:12 (NKJV)

68 Fr. Tadros Malaty, A Patristic Commentary – The Book of Exodus, p 60

could Pharaoh not accept that it was the finger of God that caused these plagues even though his own magicians recognized it?⁶⁹ Why could he not simply bow and submit to God? It is because Pharaoh himself, like any other Egyptian Pharaoh at the time, was considered a god. *“The rulers of these dynasties were equated with the gods and with the duties and obligations due to those gods. As supreme ruler of the people, the pharaoh was considered a god on earth, the intermediary between the gods and the people, and when he died, he was thought to become Osiris, the god of the dead.”*⁷⁰ This erroneous idea of being a god is what led him to this end. What is even sadder about this ideology is that it still exists until today among many people who still choose to reject the existence of God simply because they would rather be their own god. They would rather report to no one instead of finding true joy and fulfilment in their Creator.

The Killing of the Firstborns

As for the killing of the firstborns, the explanation is twofold. Firstly, the priests of the Egyptian gods often passed on their priesthood to their firstborn as the priests enjoyed

69 Exodus 8:19

70 Ancient History Encyclopedia, <http://www.ancient.eu/pharaoh/>

great power and wealth.⁷¹ Therefore God was still demonstrating to the Egyptians that He is the True God “... *that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD.*”⁷² And He did so by harming the priests of the gods. It is sad that it had to get to this point, but it was only when this last plague was completed that Pharaoh finally gave in (at least temporarily). The second reason is that God avenged the death of the children of the Jews and made the Egyptians taste their own cruelty. As HH Pope Shenouda said: “*God is perfectly just in His mercy and perfectly merciful in His justice.*”

An Opportunity

In today’s world, unfortunately many people deliberately choose to do evil out of their free will. This of course displeases God and it is not according to His will; however, He sometimes would use the evil and turn it into good. For example, although our Lord Jesus was completely innocent, the Pharisees and Romans crucified Him (the evil action), yet the Cross has given us Redemption and the possibility of eternal salvation (the positive outcome). Although this might be a vital example, there are many simple ones that happen in our

71 Marie Parsons, Priests of Ancient Egypt, <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/priests.htm>

72 Exodus 14:4 (NKJV)

daily lives. Accordingly, God used the evil of Pharaoh for the good of the entire world. First, God used this opportunity to preach His name to the future generation of Jews: *“Now the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart [allowed his heart to be hardened] and the hearts of his servants, that I may show these signs of Mine before him, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son’s son the mighty things I have done in Egypt, and My signs which I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD.’”*⁷³ And indeed, throughout the remainder of the Old Testament, God kept reminding the Jews of His mighty deeds that He committed in Egypt to lead them to repentance when they were straying away from Him. He also wanted to save the Egyptians themselves and let them come to the knowledge of the True God: *“...and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD...”*⁷⁴ And above all, He used this opportunity to spread His name throughout the world so that He might gain the many souls that would hear and accept Him: *“But indeed for this purpose I have raised you [Pharaoh] up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may*

73 Exodus 10:1-2 (NKJV)

74 Exodus 14:4 (NKJV)

*be declared in all the earth.*⁷⁵ God used the fact that Pharaoh hardened his heart to declare to the world the existence of the true God. One of the many examples that demonstrate the fruitfulness of this plan is in the book of Joshua when the inhabitants of Gibeon said to Joshua: *“From a very far country your servants have come, because of the name of the LORD your God; for we have heard of His fame, and all that He did in Egypt...”*⁷⁶

75 Exodus 9:16 (NKJV)

76 Joshua 9:9 (NKJV)

CHAPTER 5

Understanding Old Humanity

The Creator & His Creation

We, 21st century creatures, fail to understand God's judgments in allowing and commanding wars due to our lack of insight of two main facts which we will discuss shortly. Before continuing, I must say that I purposely used the word "creatures" in the opening sentence as a reminder that we are created, and that the Almighty God is the Creator. If I, the creature, could fully understand my Creator, then why should I worship Him? If I understand Him, then I am His equal, which is unquestionably not the case. We have to admit that we are inferior beings with limited understanding as God says: *"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than*

*the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.”*⁷⁷ In other words, there is no comparison between God’s judgments and ours. It is not even close! With the best of our abilities, we will try to understand God’s judgments according to what He has revealed to us, His creatures.

The Unfortunate Concubine

The first setback, which hinders us from understanding God’s judgment in these alarming stories in the Old Testament, is the assumption that humanity at the time was the same as today. To us, violence and wars are intolerable: Hitler was a criminal and a mass-murderer, the behavior of street gangs is unacceptable, and punching someone in the face is an intolerable act. On the other hand, is that how the people, at the time, perceived violence and wars? Let’s see... Unlike today, war was a very common thing at the time: *“It happened in the spring of the year, at the time kings go out to battle... ”*⁷⁸ Actually it wasn’t only war, but dreadful violence, beheadings, barbarity, cutting people into pieces, rape, prostitution, throwing children in the fire as part of pagan worship. These were more or less common actions to humankind. Here’s a

77 Isaiah 55:8-9 (NKJV)

78 Chronicles 20:1 (NKJV)

very sad example: while traveling back home, a certain Levite had his concubine (woman committed to a man, but with a lower social stature than a wife) and another male servant with him. As they had no place to stay for the night, an old man invited them to spend the night at his place and then, *“As they were enjoying themselves, suddenly certain men of the city, perverted men, surrounded the house and beat on the door. They spoke to the master of the house, the old man, saying, ‘Bring out the man who came to your house, that we may know him carnally!’ But the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, ‘No, my brethren! I beg you, do not act so wickedly! Seeing this man has come into my house, do not commit this outrage. Look, here is my virgin daughter and the man’s concubine; let me bring them out now. Humble them, and do with them as you please; but to this man do not do such a vile thing!’”*⁷⁹ Thus far, the story is very similar to the one that took place in Sodom and Gomorrah. You can already get a hint of the evil abiding in the city by the response of the old man who wanted to give these perverted men his daughter and the concubine and allowing them to do with them as they please. *“But the men would not heed him. So the man took his concubine and brought her out to them. And they knew her and abused her all night un-*

79 Judges 19: 22-24 (NKJV)

til morning; and when the day began to break, they let her go. Then the woman came as the day was dawning, and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, till it was light. When her master arose in the morning, and opened the doors of the house and went out to go his way, there was his concubine, fallen at the door of the house with her hands on the threshold. And he said to her, 'Get up and let us be going.' But there was no answer. So the man lifted her onto the donkey; and the man got up and went to his place.”⁸⁰

Instead of caring for the concubine and her health by examining her situation or calling a doctor, or at least giving her a cup of water and a morsel of bread, this coward and heartless man dared to tell his concubine, “Get up and let us be going!” I wonder, did he not care that she was being abused all night? Did he not care that she just saved his life? What atrocity! And it's not over: *“When he entered his house he took a knife, laid hold of his concubine, and divided her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel.”⁸¹* If you just read this story for the first time, I am confident that you are completely and utterly speechless. This is inhumane, but then again, this was the level of immorality in certain areas at the time. Although the people of Israel were

80 Judges 19: 25-28 (NKJV)

81 Judges 19:29 (NKJV)

offended by this act, the people of Benjamin refused to give up the men who committed this crime to be punished. This event led to war between the tribe of Benjamin and the remainder of Jewish tribes⁸². This story is dated between 1400 and 1100 BC.

Violence in World History

Historically, there is no doubt that violence and wars are prevalent in Biblical and non-Biblical texts. If we only take the last 2,000 years before Christ, we will find the presence of many empires: Assyrians, Babylonians, Medo-Persians, Greeks and Romans, only to name a few. What was the purpose of these empires you ask? To take on the world! They gained territory through wars and brutal violence. Tortures, beheadings, crucifixions, were common to some, if not all, empires. For example, according to non-Biblical historical literature, Persians are the first⁸³ to have used the method of crucifixion as a death punishment. When Darius took over Babylon, the Greek Author and Historian Herodotus (484-425 BC), says the following: *“Thus as Babylon taken for the second time. Darius having become master of the place, destroyed the wall, and tore down all the gates; for Cyrus had done neither the one nor the other when he took Babylon. He then chose*

82 Judges 20

83 Herodotus :1:128.2; 3:125.3; 3:132.2; 3:159.1

out near three thousand of the leading citizens, and caused them to be crucified”⁸⁴ He crucified 3,000 people at once! Two centuries later, Alexander the Great crucified 800 men: “Accordingly, they themselves slew Diogenes, a person of figure, and one that had been a friend to Alexander; and accused him as having assisted the king with his advice, for crucifying the eight hundred men.”⁸⁵ On another occasion, first century Roman Historian Curtius Rufus in History of Alexander mentions the following: “After that the King’s [Alexander] wrath furnished the victors with an awful spectacle; 2000 men, ... hung nailed to crosses along a great stretch of the shore”⁸⁶ Yet, people hailed and still hail this Alexander as the “Great”. The desire of Alexander’s heart was to conquer the entire world at the expense of the lives of tens of thousands, if not more. Of course, he did it through wars and excruciating punishments such as the crucifixions. So the question that comes to mind is “what is the difference between Alexander and Hitler?” Not much. However, one is hailed as the “Great,” while the other is a scandalous criminal. If Alexander was alive today, he also would have been judged as a criminal. It is obvious that humanity at the time was very much different

84 Herodotus 3:159.1

85 Josephus, the Wars of the Jews 1:5.3

86 Curtius Rufus, History of Alexander, 4:4.17

than today's. About four centuries later, Josephus mentions as well the amount of people being crucified around 70 AD by Roman general Titus: *“so they were first whipped, and then tormented with all sorts of tortures, before they died, and were then crucified before the wall of the city. This miserable procedure made Titus greatly to pity them, while they caught every day five hundred Jews; nay, some days they caught more: yet it did not appear to be safe for him to let those that were taken by force go their way, and to set a guard over so many he saw would be to make such as great deal them useless to him. The main reason why he did not forbid that cruelty was this, that he hoped the Jews might perhaps yield at that sight, out of fear lest they might themselves afterwards be liable to the same cruel treatment. So the soldiers, out of the wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest, when their multitude was so great, that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies.”*⁸⁷ 500 Jews were crucified per day, or perhaps more! There were not enough crosses to bear the victims' bodies, and there was not enough land to contain all the crosses! This is without considering the whips and tortures incurred by the victims before the cross. Furthermore, the cruelty of

87 Josephus, the Wars of the Jews 5:11.1

the people was also quite obvious in the way they engaged in war. As an example, nowadays, torturing hostages is considered a crime. Even if countries engage in war, there's a set of laws that each country ought to respect. In contrast, during the hundreds of years before the Advent of Christ, it was completely the opposite. Again, this is obvious from Biblical and non-Biblical sources. I assume the easiest example is the torturing of Christ before the Cross, which was not specific to Christ, but was the rule at the time of the Roman Empire. Another example is the beheading of the enemy. Within the Bible, there are a few examples of beheadings including the famous story of King David (approximately 1,000 BC) when he killed Goliath and beheaded him with his own sword⁸⁸. Again, we should not make the mistake of believing that God supported beheadings or any similar act of violence, but merely that it was, unfortunately, the practice at the time. For example, Archaeologists found bas-reliefs (sculptures where the carvings are slightly higher than the background – used to depict the history of some nations) during the reign of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (c. 668-627 BC) showing soldiers carrying the cut-off heads of their enemies and piling them in a tent. King Ashurbanipal also dismembered bodies of his enemies and fed them to animals: *“Their dismembered bodies I fed to the*

88 1 Samuel 17:51 (NKJV)

dogs, swine, wolves, and eagles, to the birds of heaven and the fish in the deeps. What was left of the feast of the dogs and swine, of their members which blocked the streets and filled the squares, I ordered them to remove from Babylon, Kutha and Sippar, and to cast them upon heaps.”⁸⁹ Also, Assyrians used to skin people alive as it was done to two officials at Lachish during the time of King Hezekiah (c. 739-687 BC).⁹⁰ These types of terrorizing actions were common throughout the eras before Christ. For example, Cyrus the Great, a Persian King who ruled during the 6th century BC, was also guilty of great cruelty: “*Near the beginning of October, Cyrus fought another battle at Opis on the Tigris and burned the people of Akkad with fire.*”⁹¹ Another example can be seen on the Egyptian temple walls of the Empire (c. 1570-1085 BC) which show pictures of dismemberment of defeated enemies.⁹² There are so many more examples that could be discussed, but I believe the above is enough for us to have a decent understanding of the cruelty of the people at the time. Note that these examples cover the span of the Old Testament from the time of Moses to the Advent of Christ. Similarly, during the Roman Empire, we cannot overlook the massacres that took place in the Colosse-

89 Luckenbill, vol. 2, secs. 795796.

90 Nelson’s Bible Manners and Customs, chap 9, p260

91 Nelson’s Bible Manners and Customs, chap 9, p260

92 Nelson’s Bible Manners and Customs, chap 9, p260

um. Men were thrown into the midst of beasts, like lions and bears, and were crushed for pure entertainment! Humankind was indeed disruptive, savage, and cruel. Were these empires ruled by God? Were these tortures commanded by God? No. There was absolutely no connection between God and these empires. Nonetheless, this was the level of humankind ruthlessness at the time and it also happens to be the background of the Old Testament. Consequently, we should always keep the historical context in mind when we read the Old Testament. On another note, was God content with this behavior? Absolutely not! Actually, God was eager to rid humanity from all this violence and, He did it according to His ways, which involved Him being very patient with His creation.

An Eye for an Eye

Essentially, through the process of salvation, God awaiting the right time for the incarnation of the Son of God, wanted to transform the evil in these people into righteousness, but He did it in a gradual way. Today, when we read the Old Testament, we are surprised when God gives as a Law: *“But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for*

*burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*⁹³ This law means, if someone breaks your tooth, break his; if an enemy slaps you on the cheek twice, slap him back twice. We are shocked because we are used to “*But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.*”⁹⁴ As we know God is the same in both Old and New Testaments, but the people are the ones who are different. God deals with humanity in different ways as they grow in righteousness. When God set an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth as a law, it was actually an upgrade for humankind at the time. As the examples of the cruelty (rape, cutting in limbs, beheading, crucifixion) resurface in your brain, we need to understand that people at the time were not satisfied by simply retaking what was stolen from them or killing the person who killed their brother. They took their revenge in terribly brutal ways. As an example, during the time of Jacob, grandson of Abraham, there was a man called Shechem the Hivite. Shechem was attracted to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah, and as he could not hold himself, he violated her. In order to obtain revenge for their sister, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, killed all the males of the land with the sword including Shechem. They did not simply sleep with one of Shechem sisters, or kill Shechem

93 Exodus 21:23-25 (NKJV)

94 Matthew 5:39 (NKJV)

himself. They were not satisfied until they killed all the men in the land. This was not commanded by the Lord, but it was a personal act of revenge from the brothers.⁹⁵ An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth does not sound so bad after all! Once we understand the people at the time, we understand how God dealt with them. Again, God was gradually teaching His children the way to righteousness. He led His Creation to grow out of its barbaric behavior to become a peaceful and loving people through the work of the Holy Spirit. Of course, the work of the Holy Spirit is apparent in true Christians who accept the work of God in their lives (not necessarily all humans today).

Divorce & Polygamy

Another example of God's longsuffering with mankind is His allowance for divorce and polygamy. Prior to the original sin, it is clear that Eve was taken from Adam's side and they became two people, but at the same time, there was a declaration that they will become one again: *"Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: 'This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall*

95 Genesis 34

be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.”⁹⁶

Divorce and polygamy were therefore not part of God’s original design, but God tolerated it to allow for the growth of humankind. His Perfected Law was made evident in the New Testament: *“The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?” And He answered and said to them, ‘Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’ So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.’ They said to Him, ‘Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ He said to them, ‘Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.’”⁹⁷*

96 Genesis 2:22-25 (NKJV)

97 Matthew 19:3-9 (NKJV)

CHAPTER 6

God Does Not Want War

King David & God's House

The majority of people, especially if they do not know the Bible well enough, think that God was an advocate of war in the Old Testament. This is of course very far from the reality: it is actually quite the opposite. For instance, God did not allow King David, king of Israel, a man who loved and obeyed God with all his heart, to build Him a house. David explained the reason to his son Solomon: *“My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build a house to the name of the Lord my God; but the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘You have shed much blood and have made great wars; you shall*

*not build a house for My name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight.’*²⁹⁸ God refused to have a house built by the same hands that shed all this blood. Peace and prosperity was then given to King Solomon and the house of the Lord was built during his reign. Here is a very clear statement that God disapproves of wars and violence in general.

Neither Shall They Learn War Anymore

We read in the book of Daniel the Prophet, that King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, and he was very disturbed. The dream was the following: *“You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image’s head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a*

*great mountain and filled the whole earth.*⁹⁹ We know that the different parts of the body are the different empires (from Babylon to Rome), but the interesting part is the stone that was cut without hands. This stone represents the incarnation of the Son of God. It was cut without hands since He is born of a virgin, the Virgin Mary. The stone hit the feet (symbolizes the Roman Empire) of the statue since the incarnation occurred during the Roman Empire. More importantly, this stone became a great mountain and filled the whole earth and Daniel interprets this part saying: *“And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.”*¹⁰⁰ The only kingdom that can stand forever is indeed the Kingdom of God. That great mountain is very important since it is very useful for our discussion. The Prophet Isaiah refers to this mountain stating: *“Now it shall come to pass in the latter days That the mountain of the Lord’s house Shall be established on the top of the mountains, And shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, To the house of*

99 Daniel 2:31-35 (NKJV)

100 Daniel 2:44 (NKJV)

the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, And rebuke many people; 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 anymore. O house of Jacob, come and let us walk In the light of the Lord.”¹⁰¹ Here’s the explanation: that mountain, the Kingdom of God, shall be established on top of all other earthly kingdoms and will attract many people from all nations. This Kingdom of God starts on earth with the Church, and through the Church, Christ will teach us His perfect ways, and we shall accurately walk in His paths. Then Isaiah mentions something profoundly interesting, he says the swords will be transformed into plowshares (plowshare is a blade used to break the earth and turn it over), and the spears into pruning hooks (a gardening tool used to remove branches, roots, etc.). In other words, the weapons of war will turn into gardening tools. Isaiah is proclaiming that through the plan of salvation, the Kingdom of God will shift humanity from violence to peace. He continues saying nation will no more attack nation nor will people learn war anymore. Of course, these verses are not to be taken literally. Since the

101 Isaiah 2:2-5 (NKJV)

world is not entirely Christian, war will partially remain; although today, the number of wars is significantly less than at the time of the Old Testament. Nonetheless, the true Christian, who applies God's commandments to the fullest, through the work of the Holy Spirit, will be an advocate of peace, of turning the other cheek, of bearing the cross and of going the extra mile! This is the desire of God's heart since the beginning, as revealed through His prophets. It is in this image that God created Adam and Eve; however, through the fall, humankind altered God's plan through their free will and one sin led to another and humanity became disgraced. God then redeemed humanity through the cross and again provided us the possibility of regaining the original image. This is rearticulated by Jeremiah in the following prophecy of the new covenant: *"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah--not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the*

Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."¹⁰² Israel, here, is all the heirs of Abraham through faith.¹⁰³ These heirs, which are the Christians, will have God's laws in their minds and hearts, through the Holy Spirit.

The Rod of Jesse

Isaiah also mentions another Messianic prophecy that illustrates the true and perfect will of God: "*There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.*"¹⁰⁴ This Rod or Branch that is stemming from Jesse, father of King David, is the Lord Jesus Christ who will be filled by the Holy Spirit. The prophet then goes on to say: "*The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; Their young ones shall lie down*

102 Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NKJV)

103 Romans 4:13-17

104 Isaiah 11:1-2 (NKJV)

together; And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord As the waters cover the sea."¹⁰⁵

This prophecy indicates that through the incarnation of Christ and the plan of salvation, God will give humanity the Gift of the Holy Spirit. As Christianity spreads in the world, the wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard with the goat; meaning violence between adversaries will diminish and peace will propagate. God's will is clear – war and violence are not the solution. His will becomes much more evident in His teachings in the New Testament. Now that humanity is about to fully grow through the Gift of the Holy Spirit, God gave us the complete and absolute commandments: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your en-*

105 Isaiah 11:6-9 (NKJV)

emy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”¹⁰⁶ This was His will since the beginning!

What About Violence Today?

Some could argue that the same type of Old Testament violence is in effect today. Although this statement is true, this barbaric violence is present in exceptional cases like in certain third-world countries, street gangs, or occasionally in the teachings of other religions. The main difference is that at the time, it was a general way of life; today, violence is rejected by most of the world. For example, in the Old Testament all the kings went to war: *“It happened in the spring of the year, at the time kings go out to battle, that Joab led out the armed*

106 Matthew 5:38-48 (NKJV)

*forces and ravaged the country of the people of Ammon, and came and besieged Rabbah...*¹⁰⁷ As you see, there was a season for the kings to go out to battle. This was the custom. Today, engaging in war is highly rebuked by most countries.

Some people make the unfortunate comparison between the violence in the Old Testament and the violence in the teaching of other religions today. In fact, this comparison is invalid. As demonstrated throughout this book, in the Old Testament, God was dealing with humanity at its level; however, in the New Testament humanity was ready and God then commanded to love our enemies. Historically, the first Church (1st century) was full of love, and peace, even when She was the one being persecuted. A small example is the killing of St. James the son of Zebedee and the arrest of St. Peter: *“Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread.”*¹⁰⁸ As Christ had thought the Church to love her enemies and not use the sword but to preach the true Gospel of Love and Peace, the reaction

107 1 Chronicles 20:1 (NKJV)

108 Acts 12: 1-3 (NKJV)

of the Church was quite simple: “*So when he [Herod] had arrested him [Peter], he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover. Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church.*”¹⁰⁹ The response of the Church was prayer! The Church history in the first centuries is full with stories of martyrs that died for their faith as the Church was being persecuted.

Therefore the real question is: if the Church was capable of living and preaching the true Gospel of Peace for hundreds of years, why do other religions today bring us back to the Old Testament violence and more? If we would like to make a fair assessment between the violence in Christianity and other religions, we would compare the teachings of others with the teachings of the New Testament!

Some always argue that at the beginning of the second millennium, the Church of Rome declared Holy War with the crusades as a response to them being attacked. This is a true historical fact but it is also a huge mistake that we, as Christians of all denominations, have to face the consequences of

109 Acts 12: 4-5 (NKJV)

today. When we make a comparison like this, the grounds of the comparison should be the teachings of the religion and not the mistakes that people make. The teachings of Christ are very clear: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”*¹¹⁰

110 Matthew 5:38-48 (NKJV)

CHAPTER 7

God Does Not Want War, but Allowed It

God Allowed Wars Due to Our Weakness

When God created the Heavens and the Earth, they were flawless. Well, until mankind got involved. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God and broke the commandment, the Earth was cursed. God said to Adam: *“Cursed is the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life.”*¹¹¹ The same goes for the creation of humans. The creation was good as we were created in the image and likeness of God. However, as already explained, mankind distorted this perfect image through free will and humanity sank to such dread-

111 Genesis 3:17 (NKJV)

ful levels of cruelty and violence. God did not want to leave humanity this way, and He worked with them through the establishment of the commandments. Once again, we should remind ourselves that God does not force humans to obey Him, but gives us the free will to love Him or not. He simply puts the laws as a guide and wishes for us to follow them; however, it is up to us to honor or dishonor them. Hence, throughout the Old Testament, our longsuffering God worked with humans at their level and progressively brought them up. God allowed wars not because He delighted in them, but because He was working with such a distorted image of humankind.

God Commands War

On the other hand, in many instances, God commanded war on certain nations. He also supported the Jews in their conquest of Canaan, the Promised Land, and in their destruction of some entire nations along with their possessions. During the times of Moses and Joshua, 1,500 and 1,400 years BC respectively, God said: *“For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off.”*¹¹² As harsh as the verse above may

112 Exodus 23:23 (NKJV)

sound, we should remember that the inhabitants of Canaan were very savage and cruel people. The Bible gives us a hint of their sin when God was addressing the Jewish nation and said: *“When you come into the land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead.”*¹¹³ In short, these people worshiped Satan and offered their kids as living sacrifices to pagan gods. The Bible does not elaborate on their sin but we can easily imagine how cruel these nations were based on the child sacrifices they offered and on the violence portrayed in the previous chapters. Furthermore, do not imagine that God rushed to their destruction. He actually demonstrated great patience with these nations. God was already displeased with the Canaanite nations during the life of Abraham, 2,000 years BC, as they committed their sins, but He was longsuffering with them, seeking their repentance. This is demonstrated in the conversation between God and Abraham (or Abram at the time): *“Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in*

113 Deuteronomy 18:9-11 (NKJV)

a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."¹¹⁴ The All-Knowing God revealed to Abraham that his descendants will be slaves in Egypt for four centuries; then Egypt itself will be judged based on their sins (ten plagues) and finally, the Jews will return to Canaan. Why all of this Lord? Because the sin of the Amorites (Canaanites) is not yet complete! Since there was still a chance for repentance, God endured these hundreds of years because He is compassionate and seeks their salvation. However, when their sin was complete, when there was no chance for repentance, it was time for Judgment. In general, these wars can be attributed as God's Judgment over the nations. As explained earlier, wars at the time were very common. All nations went to war as there was no political system in place as there is today. God simply used these wars as a means to attribute judgment to whom judgment was due. God permitted these nations to be judged as per their deeds. What I mean is that God allowed, in His perfect Justice, these na-

114 Genesis 15:13-16 (NKJV)

tions to be afflicted by war in the same way they had afflicted others for years. In other words, these nations fought, killed and conquered for many years and their judgment was now due. As Our Lord Jesus said to St. Peter in the garden of Gethsemane during His arrest, *“Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”*¹¹⁵ A similar statement was said by the prophet Samuel during the reign of King Saul, King of Israel in the 11th century BC. Saul had come back from war and did not kill King Agag the Amalekite as he was supposed to. Samuel took the matter into his own hands and said to Agag: *“ ‘As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.’ And Samuel hacked Agag in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal.”*¹¹⁶ This statement that Christ said to St. Peter in Gethsemane was not a new commandment. In fact it originates from Genesis 9: *“Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning [a settlement]; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. ‘Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man.’ ”*¹¹⁷ God wanted to teach Noah and his children

115 Matthew 26:52 (NKJV)

116 1 Samuel 15:33 (NKJV)

117 Genesis 9:5-6 (NKJV)

(to whom this commandment was given) that human life has an infinite value because humans are created in the image of God. Consequently, He is warning them about killing others by declaring that the same destiny will be reserved for them. This is nothing less than the administration of perfect justice. It is up to God to decide how He executes His judgments; nevertheless, the end result is clear, those who live in sin will inherit death, but the righteous will inherit eternal life as St Paul says through the Holy Spirit, *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*¹¹⁸

The Unfair Judge

To those who are still wondering how God can allow this killing even if it is for judgment purposes, His Grace Bishop Raphael from the Coptic Orthodox Church, gives an excellent analogy. Imagine a judge sitting on his judgment seat studying a criminal case. After he listened to the prosecutor, the defense lawyer, the many witnesses, studied every detail of the case, and verified the trustworthiness of the evidence, he concluded that the accused is indeed a criminal and is deserving of death. Is he a fair judge? Yes, indeed. What if the accused were a group of people, would the decision be any different?

118 Romans 6:23 (NKJV)

No, they are all guilty and all should be sentenced to death. What if the ending of this story was a bit different? What if the judge, although aware of the evidence, sets a criminal to be freed; would this judge be righteous? No, he would be unfair to the entire nation, and he would put the lives of many in danger. It is the judge's duty to ensure the criminals are sentenced according to the seriousness of the crimes committed. Why then do we support the earthly judge in condemning to death, but we do not support God when He alone has perfect judgment? Once the judge has condemned the accused to death, an executioner implements the orders. It is similar with God where He judges according to His Righteousness but others carry the orders. One can question whether it is fit for humans (judges) to condemn other humans (criminals) to death. However, it is certainly fit for God as He is the Author of life and has given us life as a gift. This gift is temporal on earth, but extends for eternity in the afterlife.

Israel & the Golden Calf

We must always remember that the entire purpose of the Old Testament is to give birth to the New Testament. In other words, the purpose of the calling of Abraham and his heirs together with God giving the Old Testament Law is to keep the Jewish nation chaste and pure and therefore, to bring

out of it the Savior of the world, the Messiah Jesus Christ. In addition to the Canaanites' judgment being due, it was imperative, at this level of corruption, to sanctify the Earth from the sin of the Canaanites. This was needed because, unfortunately, humankind tends to be weak in the face of sin. People rapidly turn away from God when tempted. The main example that comes to mind is Israel worshipping the golden calf, while Moses was receiving the 10 commandments written by the Finger of God. What is utterly astonishing is that Israel had witnessed the ten plagues come down upon the Egyptians (while they were protected from them), the parting of the Red Sea, God's presence through the appearance of pillars of cloud and fire (by day and by night respectively), the voice of God resounding like thunder, water coming from a rock, manna descending from the sky, bitter water made sweet. Yet, after all this, Israel dared to build a golden calf, offered sacrifices, ate, drank, committed adultery, and pointed to the calf and said, *"This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"*¹¹⁹ It is just unbelievable that they so quickly turned from the True God to commit sin even after seeing all these miracles! There is no doubt that these sinful nations needed to be removed for the greater good of mankind, for the arrival of the Messiah which saves the world.

119 Exodus 32:8 (NKJV)

The Battle with the Midianites

There is one major event in the Old Testament that is often misunderstood and used by skeptics to damage God's Image. In the book of Numbers, Israel had gone to war against the Midianites and killed all the adult males, but then Moses ordered the following: *"Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man intimately. But keep alive for yourselves all the young girls who have not known a man intimately."*¹²⁰ The main accusations against this passage are two-fold. First, that Israel committed genocide on the Midian people, an abhorrent war crime, which brings up the question of how Moses, a man of God, could order such a terrible thing? The second part claims the purpose, for which they kept the little girls alive, was so that the men of Israel could use them for sex-slavery. Before discussing these two accusations, let us first understand the background of the passage. The story starts earlier in the book of Numbers when Balak, king of Moab, and the elders of Midian were afraid of Israel and wanted to put a curse on them. They consequently called for Balaam to curse Israel, but the result was actually quite the opposite; Balaam blessed Israel

120 Numbers 31:17-18 (NKJV)

as it was the Lord's command¹²¹. In the next chapter, we read: *"Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel."*¹²² So what happened between Balaam blessing Israel and Israel committing sexual immorality by worshiping other gods? The answer comes in the book of Revelation: *"But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak [King of Moab], to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality."*¹²³ Here, greedy Balaam suggested to Moab and Midian a way to deceive Israel to worship the idol Baal Peor whose worship involved sexual immorality. This is an act against God's commandments who had already warned Israel numerous times about this matter. In addition, it is quite clear that this mistake had a deep negative spiritual impact on Israel for a while, as Joshua says many years later, *"Is the iniquity of Peor not enough for us, from which we are not cleansed until this day..."*¹²⁴ It is on this basis that Israel attacked Mid-

121 Numbers 22, 23, 24

122 Numbers 25: 1-3 (NKJV)

123 Revelations 2:14 (NKJV)

124 Joshua 22:17 (NKJV)

ian. To properly understand this event, the reader must look at the big picture. With the Jewish nation being so easily entangled in sin time and time again, it was essential that God, in His Judgment, take a stand to avoid the propagation of the sin and the complete destruction of Israel. The destruction of Israel would have affected the nativity of Christ.

Let us now look at the two accusations mentioned above and see if they truly have proper grounds for their claims. Did Israel commit genocide on the Midian people? First, in Biblical tradition, the Midianites were “*as nomadic sheep and camel herders, caravaneers, and raiders, ranging over a wide territory to the south and east of Canaan.*”¹²⁵ This territory included: “*...northwest Arabia, southern Transjordan, the Arabah, portions of the Negeb, and possibly northern Sinai.*”¹²⁶ Since the Midianites ranged over a wide territory, it is unsound to believe that the entire people were being attacked. In fact, when the Biblical text mentions the killing of all males and adult women, it is solely referring to the people that enticed Israel to commit the sexual immorality, not to the entire nation of the Midianites. This conclusion is also sup-

125 The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East. Eric M. Meyers (ed). Oxford:1007 (5 vols)

126 International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed), Eerdmans:1979.

ported by the fact that Israel sent only 12,000 men of war¹²⁷ against the Midianites. This number would imply that the battle was against a similar number of Midianites; some estimate between 8,000 to 15,000 people.¹²⁸ Again, this implies that we are dealing only with a portion of the Midianites. Furthermore, it is obvious from additional Biblical passages that the Midianites were not totally destroyed. A few years later, the book of Judges reveals the following: *“and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains. So it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them... So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites, and the children of Israel cried out to the Lord.”*¹²⁹ In conclusion, this war was not genocide as some claim.

The second accusation is that Israel kept the little girls for sex-slavery. This claim is simply groundless. The Bible does not mention anything about sex-slavery anywhere whether in this passage or in any other. On the other hand, God repeatedly warned Israel against sexual immorality in the Old Testa-

127 Numbers 31:3-4

128 <http://christianthinktank.com/midian.html>

129 Judges 6:2-6 (NKJV)

ment. It is unjustifiable to believe that God would have tolerated Israel to do so just this once. Keeping the background of the Old Testament in mind (wars were allowed as discussed in earlier chapters), it was rational for Israel to kill the Midianite women as they are the ones that enticed the people of Israel to sin (the purpose of this war was to keep Israel away from sin). Furthermore, in Jewish tradition, the following is mentioned: *“And then Balaam said to him, ‘Come and let us plan what you should do to them. Pick out the beautiful women who are among us and in Midian, and station them naked and adorned with gold and precious stones before them. And when they see them and lie with them, they will sin against their LORD and fall into your hands; for otherwise you cannot fight against them”*¹³⁰ This was truly a hostile deception that is unthought-of today. We are talking about women that agreed to jeopardize their family life and their morals, if any, by offering free prostitution on a mass scale with the intention of destroying the Israelites. The men of course had a role to play in this cunning act. It is unclear if they are the ones who proposed or agreed to the idea, but they were equally guilty. In regards to the killing of the boys, it was common in all Ancient Near East civilizations to regard the male slaves as

130 The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (2 vols), Charlesworth (ed), Doubleday: 1983

a military threat, even if they were young boys.¹³¹ It was a cultural decision taken by Israel at the time based on the way humanity used to deal with slaves. Of course, the little girls were not considered a threat and the Israelites were therefore humane in keeping them. If Israel had not decided to keep them, then these girls would have probably died of hunger and those who survived would have perhaps been captured as slaves. In addition, “*No ANE [Ancient Near East] land-based and/or blood-succession-based civilization had means for assimilating foreign males into them, except as severely constrained/debilitated slaves.*”¹³² In other words, historically, due to the nature of their circumstances, Israel could not have assimilated the boys. Remember, the people of Israel were nomads at the time.

131 <http://christianthinktank.com/midian.html>

132 Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia. Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat. Greenwood Press:1998

CHAPTER 8

Why Such Brutal Punishments?

Samson & the Change of Clothes

Another challenge that Christians and non-Christians face in attempting to understand the Old Testament is the severity of the punishments of the Mosaic Law upon those who broke it. For instance, stoning was the official punishment for those who worshipped other gods, did not respect the Sabbath or dishonored their parents. At first glance, it seems very ruthless for God to order the stoning of a person as a consequence for disobeying His Law. But is that really the case? To fairly understand someone's actions, one always needs to grasp the context of the actions. Let us therefore refer back to the savagery demonstrated by humankind in the Old Testament which was discussed in the previous chapters. First,

war was common at the time as the nations were fighting for power by enlarging their territory. During these wars, the soldiers would skin off their enemies, fasten their bodies to the wall¹³³, cut off their heads and make a pile out of them, cut off their thumbs and big toes of the opposition's leaders and then use them as slaves, they would leave enemies hanging on trees until evening time or the next day, brutally crucifying people by the hundreds and thousands, just to name a few of the common practices of war at the time. We see an example of this brutality in the story of Samson. Samson was a judge in the 11th century BC, during the era of the Judges of Israel, before Saul was anointed as the first king in Israel. Samson was attracted to a Philistine woman and married her. On the day of their marriage, Samson posed a riddle to the thirty companions at the wedding. If they would solve the riddle within the appointed seven days, he would give each a garment and a change of clothing. If they would fail to solve the riddle then they would give Samson the same. Six days passed, *“But it came to pass on the seventh day that they said to Samson’s wife, ‘Entice your husband, that he may explain the riddle to us, or else we will burn you and your father’s house with fire. Have you invited us in order to take what is ours? Is that*

133 1 Samuel 31:10

not so?’ ”¹³⁴ Indeed, Samson’s wife enticed him and told them the answer to the riddle. The point I would like to make out of this story is that the people would rather burn the woman and her family than to lose a change of clothes! Later on in the story when Samson realized that his father-in-law had given his wife to another man, he decided to burn the Philistines grain, vineyards and olive groves. The Philistines reaction was to burn the wife and the father: *“Then the Philistines said, ‘Who has done this?’ And they answered, ‘Samson, the son-in-law of the Timnite, because he has taken his wife and given her to his companion.’ So the Philistines came up and burned her and her father with fire.”*¹³⁵ I understand that it is hard to imagine for us in the 21st century since we have never experienced such cruelty on a general level; nonetheless, history clearly demonstrates humanity’s merciless behavior. In addition to wars and punishing others for their perceived wrongs, historically, we see this cruel behavior directed towards innocent people. For instance, in the Roman Colosseum, where criminals, whether truly guilty or innocent people, were thrown in the arena to fight with lions and bears for the sake of the entertainment of others. No one was meant to exit alive. Most of these criminals were thrown to the animals with

134 Judges 14:15 (NKJV)

135 Judges 15:6 (NKJV)

virtually nothing to defend themselves. In the rare event that a person would succeed in killing the animal, another animal would be sent into the ring to finish him off. All of this took place while the crowd cheered at the amazing spectacle that was set before them. Would we enjoy this type of entertainment nowadays? I highly doubt it. Yet, this is how humanity was at the time. So the question that arises is: how does one deal with such people? And I don't mean just the Romans, but all the people before the Romans as well, the people of the Old Testament. Remember, every nation had its own set of laws, and these laws were implemented at the whim of the official in charge i.e. emperor or governor. Given the violent and barbaric nature of mankind at the time, the punishments needed to be severe to fit the crimes. Inflicting these harsh punishments was the only way to guide the people in the right direction. We must remember that the objective of the Mosaic Law was the protection of the Jewish nation, the growth of mankind and the nativity of the Messiah who was to bring salvation to the world. Therefore, God instructed the Jewish nation through these commandments: *“For the Lord’s portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land And in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of*

His eye."¹³⁶ God encircled the Jews to protect them from destruction by instructing them with His commandments.

It Was Necessary

It is quite clear that God's Law evolved in the New Testament. It has been perfected. Since humankind has grown, God provided the ultimate Law, the true law, which all Christians must follow. In addition, He has given us the greatest gift of all, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells in us, guides us, and enables us to fulfill the commandments. God could not have asked the Old Testament woman to love her enemy, or give the other cheek. He elevated His ways as we changed for the better. God dealt with humanity as per humanity's limits. We can see this concept in our governments today. Different punishments are given to different people according to their circumstances. For example, in a criminal case, a child, a juvenile, and an adult would all have different sentences. In addition, in certain countries, if the criminal is still under the legal age, their criminal record could be erased. Also, a mentally sick person would receive a different sentence than the sane one. As a parent, I would not punish a three-year old in the same way I would punish a teenager. Even in reward-

136 Deuteronomy 32:9-10 (NKJV)

ing children, the reward would depend on the age and interests of the children. For our own benefit, God, in His Wisdom, dealt with humanity as it was necessary. It was imperative that there would be serious consequences to the one who committed sin. By implementing these consequences, God actually meant to confine His people from going astray. The Jews at the time, like all other nations, were prone to sin and more importantly were barbarians compared to people today. Therefore, these harsh punishments needed to be in place to ensure the commandments were respected. How else would you prevent a savage person from sinning if it is not that he be afraid of the equally savage punishment that he could suffer? The only other alternative is to have allowed for easy punishments, which would have led to the breaking of the commandments and consequently sin. Sin would have then propagated and would have led to the destruction of humanity once more, just as in Noah's time. Referring back to the examples mentioned above of stoning as a consequence of breaking the Law, it goes without saying that it was crucial for the Jewish nation to worship the only True God and no other gods. It was crucial for children to listen to their parents to be instructed in the ways of God. It was crucial that the Sabbath be respected, so that they could dedicate time to spend with God and to know Him, as well as liberating their mind from the materialistic day-to-day world, which is a habit that leads to destruction.

Breaking these laws would have led the people astray.

The Application of the Law

When one carefully reads the Old Testament, one comes to the realization that God strictly applies the commandments in the beginning of the Israelites journey, and as time passes, the Law is applied in a more merciful way. As we browse the Bible, we see many examples of people who committed sins and God remained patient with them. However, it was particularly important in the beginning of the journey, to set the tone and emphasize to His people the importance of walking in the right direction. The beginning is the most crucial time to set things straight. In our current world, good teachers, parents, and managers do the same. Good teachers are strict in the beginning of the year and loosen up with the students as time passes by. It does not mean that the rules have changed, or are not important anymore. On the contrary, a teacher can choose to pardon the behavioral mistake of a student by warning her instead of punishing her, and it would not negatively affect the behavior of the overall class or of that student since there is a history between the teacher and the class. For example, after three months of applying strict punishments, the teacher will not lose control over the class because she opted to warn a couple of times instead of pun-

ishing. Of course, if the teacher always overlooks the mistakes then the control will be lost. Consequently, the rules need to remain but the application of the rules may vary according to the relationship between the teacher and the student. It is the same with God. If God has warned someone a few times (although the warnings are not necessarily written in the Bible – not everything is documented), He will eventually punish him because the commandments need to be applied. Therefore, I can read of an event in the Old Testament where someone is being punished and I think that God is being harsh with that person; however, I might have overlooked the fact that God warned him many times before and the person still chose to disobey. God was just with this person, whether the warnings are documented in the Bible or not. As our relationship with God deepens and we get to know Him better, we will realize without a doubt that God is truly patient and merciful with humans throughout all generations. As Ezekiel says: *“But if a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live.”*¹³⁷

137 Ezekiel 18:21-22 (NKJV)

Uzzah & the Ark

During the end of the reign of Judges in Israel (11th century BC), before Saul became the first King in Israel, the Philistines had captured the ark of God. As many troubles befell the Philistines due to the stealing of the ark, they sent it back to Israel and it remained in the house of Abinadab, father of Uzzah, in Kirjath Jearim for many years. Once David became King (~ 1000 BC), his first endeavor was to bring back the ark of God where it belonged, in a new tent in Jerusalem. To do so, they placed the ark on a new cart and got some oxen to pull the cart. David and all of Israel were praising God with all their might and all the people were extremely joyous. As they were progressing towards Jerusalem, the oxen stumbled so Uzzah reached out his hand to support the ark but as soon as he touched it, he fell dead and the Bible states that the Lord was angry with Uzzah. David was upset at God that day and feared Him and therefore decided to send the ark to the house of Obed-Edom. Many people are troubled by this story. Why would God do such a thing? The King and the people were praising Him. They wanted to bring back the ark to its usual place and Uzzah seemed to care so much for the ark that he was the first one to protect it. What made God upset at this situation? Indeed, at first glance, Uzzah seems to be a fallen hero while God seems to be a wrathful God, quick to punish.

Our first clue to understand this mysterious story is that God blessed the house of Obed-Edom and all that he possessed because he kept the ark of God in his house. The first question that should come to mind is: why would God bless Obed-Edom but kill Uzzah? God does not change; the ark is the same. The only variable in this story is the person dealing with the ark. Obviously, if Obed-Edom was blessed by God, we can fairly say it is because of his righteousness. Then, by the same token, Uzzah must have transgressed against God. So what did Uzzah do? Before answering this question, let us first see how God directed the Jews to move the ark. During the time of Moses, God gave clear instructions on the design and the material to be used for the ark. He also mentioned how it is to be moved. The sons of Kohath, which are Levites, were to insert a pole on each side of the ark into the ark's rings and carry the ark on their shoulders. God then added the following: *“And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, when the camp is set to go, then the sons of Kohath shall come to carry them; but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die.”*¹³⁸ The Law was clear, if you touch any of the holy things, which include the ark itself, you shall die. Why should they

138 Numbers 4:15 (NKJV)

die? *“For our God is a consuming fire.”*¹³⁹ It is His nature.

Let’s take an example: a mother consistently warns her child not to put her hand on the stove. To make sure that she will remember, she writes a note on the refrigerator and keeps it there and repeatedly reminds her daughter of the note and its content. If the little girl puts her hand on the stove and gets burned, is she in a position to blame her mother? God is a consuming fire. It is His nature. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. If I would travel to space and get close to the sun, would it burn me? In a fraction of a second! God is the One that created this sun, how much more would it consume me if I would approach Him?

However, God is not a mere creation like the sun but the All-Wise Merciful Creator so why would He punish Israel and specifically Uzzah in this way? Firstly, as the story unfolds we realize that David learned his lesson and the second time around, he applied God’s instructions to the letter: *“And David called for Zadok and Abiathar the priests, and for the Levites... He said to them, ‘You are the heads of the fathers’ houses of the Levites; sanctify yourselves, you and your brethren, that you may bring up the ark of the LORD*

139 Hebrews 12:29 (NKJV)

*God of Israel to the place I have prepared for it. For because you did not do it the first time, the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not consult Him about the proper order.’ So the priests and the Levites sanctified themselves to bring up the ark of the LORD God of Israel. And the children of the Levites bore the ark of God on their shoulders, by its poles, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD.”*¹⁴⁰ The Bible clarifies that God broke out against them because they did not carry the ark according to the proper order. In fact, when God’s instructions were carried God helped the Levites to carry the ark.¹⁴¹ The fact that David refers to the Law of Moses and applies it to the smallest detail is a compelling proof that the Law was available but it was ignored. Many times in our lives as well, we put our Bible on the side, we ignore the commandments and we dare to complain against God about whatever tribulation we are going through. As I already mentioned, the commandments are there for our protection. If I choose to disobey the commandment then, by the same token, I choose to suffer any consequences. Why am I blaming God if He warned me and He is trying to protect me?

Secondly, the fact that God punished Uzzah and not

140 1 Chronicles 15:11-15 (NKJV)

141 1 Chronicles 15:20

the entire people is a sign of His Mercy. The reason Uzzah was struck is because he was careless and did not revere the ark or God. Uzzah had the ark in his house, and as time progressed, he lost his fear of God. Hippolytus, a 3rd century Christian leader says: “*But Uzzah, with a faithless spirit, stretched out his hand towards it and fell dead.*”¹⁴² This behavior of Uzzah is also confirmed by St. John Chrysostom and St. Jerome.

In summary, if the Jews had followed God’s instructions, there would be no cart, no oxen and therefore no stumbling. However, it is Uzzah’s faithless spirit that led to his death. In the Old Testament, God put a very specific Law for the ark and the remainder of the holy things. These things were so sacred that the High Priest was allowed to get in the Holy of Holies to atone for the sin of the people only once a year. When the High Priest would step in, the Jewish rite was to attach a rope around him. This rope was used to pull him out in case he would die inside for fear of stepping in. Today, we have trouble understanding this story because we live in continuous Grace. I can approach the holy altar of God and even partake of His Body and Blood and I am not affected as long as it is done with reverence; however, in the Old Testament, approaching God to the point of faithlessly touching

142 Hippolytus, *On The Apostolic Tradition*, p. 176

the ark was a huge sin that was unthinkable. Often we are incapable of understanding the Old Testament because of our current preconception based on New Testament teachings. However, we need to put ourselves in the context of the Old Testament to better comprehend God's actions in tough situations as this one.

CHAPTER 9

Why Israel?

Was Salvation Only Available to the Jews?

It is seemingly obvious that in the Old Testament Israel had a special place in God's heart, so to speak... This statement often leads many to wonder if God is partial between a nation and another. Why did God choose the Jews? Does He prefer them over other nations? Does He not love the other nations that He cast out for the sake of the Jews? Was salvation in the Old Testament only available to the Jews? A person that is devoid of a suitable understanding of the Bible can easily be ensnared by these questions. Indeed, some often have problems with the above questions, so we pray that, with God's grace, we can tackle them with an open heart and that God may grant us understanding. Let's start with the easiest

question: was salvation in the Old Testament only available to the Jews? The simple answer is no. Salvation is available to everyone in the New Testament, as well as in the Old Testament: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”*¹⁴³ God loves the whole world, and He came for each individual that ever lived, or still to live. In fact, there are numerous examples in the Old Testament, which demonstrate that salvation was available to all. Perhaps the most famous example would be the repentance of the people of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. God sent his servant Jonah, to preach repentance to the Ninevites, and they accepted God’s message. The king proclaimed a fast: *“Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.”*¹⁴⁴ God accepted their repentance, although, later on, in 722 BC, the people of Nineveh attacked the Northern Kingdom of Israel and destroyed it. This was the end of the Northern Kingdom, only the Southern Kingdom remained. Was this just an exception? No, God prophesied

143 John 3:16 (NKJV)

144 Jonah 3:7-8 (NKJV)

through His Old Testament servants many times that salvation is also available to the Gentiles (non-Jews). God says about His Christ, through Isaiah: *“Indeed He says, ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.’”*¹⁴⁵ The Psalms say, *“All the ends of the world Shall remember and turn to the Lord, And all the families of the nations Shall worship before You.”*¹⁴⁶ Zechariah says, *“Many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and they shall become My people. And I will dwell in your midst. Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent Me to you.”*¹⁴⁷ Malachi says, *“For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to My name, And a pure offering; For My name shall be great among the nations,” Says the Lord of hosts.”*¹⁴⁸ There are other verses that could be quoted. It is also worth noting that God had put some laws for the Gentiles that wanted to assimilate themselves to Israel, which also demonstrates His acceptance of the Gentiles. Some examples of these Gentiles are

145 Isaiah 49:6 (NKJV)

146 Psalm 22:27 (NKJV)

147 Zechariah 2:11 (NKJV)

148 Malachi 1:11 (NKJV)

Ruth the Moabitess,¹⁴⁹ Rahab the harlot¹⁵⁰ that lived in Jericho at the time of Joshua and the repentant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.¹⁵¹ Similarly, God's will to preach to the Gentiles in the entire world was also made clear when God used the ten plagues as a way to communicate to the world that He is the True God (in addition to delivering His people from slavery). In fact, there are many more examples that we often forget about of individuals that would not fall under the definition of the "Jewish" people. Simply put, the definition of a Jew is being the son or daughter of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and finally Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. Well, what about all the righteous people prior to these Patriarchs? What about Adam, Eve, Seth, Enoch, Noah and the like? These are not Jews, yet they are the people of God, and He clearly accepted them.

A Nation of Priests

Actually, if we dig a bit deeper, we would understand that God had intended for Israel to be a nation of priests, prophets and missionaries. God says to Moses about Israel,

149 Bible, Book of Ruth

150 Joshua 6:17&23

151 Daniel 4:34-36

*“And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*¹⁵² And He also told Abraham, *“I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*¹⁵³ God’s calling for Israel involved them preaching their God to the other nations, so they also can turn to the Lord. In the same way a priest preaches to people and a holy person leads others to holiness. Of course, their failure to fulfill this plan does not stop God from reaching His gentile people. Let us not be quick in judging Israel; let us remember that we also as Christians have a very similar calling: *“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”*¹⁵⁴ Let us instead ask ourselves if we are fulfilling our calling?

Why Did God Choose Abraham?

As mentioned earlier, when we go back to the origins of humanity, there was no such thing as a Jewish nation.

152 Exodus 19:6 (NKJV)

153 Genesis 12:3 (NKJV)

154 Matthew 5:14-16 (NKJV)

Adam and Eve and their children were happily living in Paradise and enjoying the immortal state God had created them in; that is until sin crept up and humanity fell. One sin led to another and many generations passed by until Abram (Abraham) was born. Abram was living in a society where everyone around him worshipped pagan idols, but he knew better. Why did God choose Abram? Because Abram chose God. Abram was not content with worshipping what was made by human hands. He gave in to the instincts within him which led him to worship the real God, the Omnipotent God Who created the heavens and the earth: *“For many are called, but few are chosen.”*¹⁵⁵ God calls everyone but He chooses the few that chose Him as well. In fact, the same principle applies nowadays. Personally, I am extremely lucky to be born a Christian, but why is that? Why me? Well, simply put, because my parents decided to remain Christians, practice their faith, and pass it on to me. Someone else’s parents might have been atheists and later on, converted to Christianity. In that case, their daughter would now be a Christian because of their decision, as well as her own decision to remain and practice Christianity. God does not impose Himself on us; He is Love, remember? We choose Him by loving Him back. St. Paul says: *“that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that*

155 Matthew 22:14 (NKJV)

*you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height. To know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*¹⁵⁶ In other words, God will use those who love Him back and will work through them with the “power that works in us”, which is the Holy Spirit we inherited through the sacrament of Holy Chrism. Of course, God allowed Abram, the man of faith and obedience to partake of the blessings of being part of the fulfillment of the plan of salvation by being the ancestor of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We, as well, could be used as tools for the salvation of many and inherit God’s blessings in our lives.

God Wipes out the Other Nations Before Israel

This question stumbles many, but we actually indirectly answered it many times through this book already. Abraham’s obedience did not lead God to prefer the Jews over other nations. The sin of the people of Canaan (or others) was complete

156 Ephesians 3:17-21 (NKJV)

and therefore, their punishment was due. So these people had to go because of their sin, not because God preferred the Jews. In fact, God loved the people of Canaan very much, and this is shown in His mercy to them by being longsuffering with them for four hundred years¹⁵⁷. God was patiently waiting for them although He knew very well that they would not repent.

God's Dealing with the Jews

As a matter of fact, when the Jews sinned, God treated them in the same way He treated the other nations. This justice is shown in many examples, including the destruction of the Northern Kingdom (ten tribes), in 722 BC, when Israel had corrupted themselves in sin and idolatry and rejected any call of repentance from God's prophets. It is also shown in the Southern Kingdom (the remainder 2 tribes - Judah and Benjamin) when they also forgot their purpose and lived in sin: *"And the LORD has sent to you all His servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, but you have not listened nor inclined your ear to hear. They said, 'Repent now everyone of his evil way and his evil doings, and dwell in the land that the LORD has given to you and your fathers forever and ever. Do not go after other gods to serve them and worship*

157 Genesis 15:13-16

*them, and do not provoke Me to anger [not literal anger] with the works of your hands; and I will not harm you. Yet you have not listened to Me,' says the LORD, 'that you might provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt... Because you have not heard My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,' says the LORD, 'and Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, My servant will bring them against this land, against its inhabitants, and against these nations all around, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, a hissing, and perpetual desolations... And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.'*¹⁵⁸ In the same way, God was patient with the Gentiles, He was patient with Israel, and as He punished the Gentiles for their continuous sin and lack of repentance, so He did to the Jewish nation. The Justice of God between the Israelites and the Gentiles is obvious throughout the Old Testament, but I will quote one last verse: *"Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, Because they have despised the law of the LORD, And have not kept His commandments. Their lies lead them astray, Lies which*

158 Jeremiah 25:4-7, 8-9, 11 (NKJV)

their fathers followed."¹⁵⁹

The Covenant

In reality, the only difference in the way God dealt with Israel compared to the other nations is that He respected His covenantal promise. Because of God's covenant with Israel, He always kept a remainder of the nation to continue the inheritance and eventually bring forth the Messiah: "*Behold, the days are coming,*' says the LORD, *That I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; A King shall reign and prosper, And execute judgment and righteousness in the earth.*"¹⁶⁰ This covenant is apparent in many references in the Old Testament, but it is probably the clearest in Isaiah's prophecy: "*For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.*"¹⁶¹ In this prophecy, it is

159 Amos 2:4 (NKJV)

160 Jeremiah 23:5 (NKJV)

161 Isaiah 9:6-7 (NKJV)

apparent that the Messiah, the Mighty God, will be a Son of David and will sit on David's throne. Therefore, the promise was that the Messiah will come from the Jews and of course, it goes without saying, that God will always remember and respect His Covenants and promises.

Why the Land of Canaan?

What about the land of Canaan? Is it not unfair that God takes away the land from the Canaanites to give it to the Jews? Indeed the land of Canaan was very special in God's eyes: *"a land for which the Lord your God cares; the eyes of the Lord your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the very end of the year."*¹⁶² As this is a fair question to ask, the response is very simple. Actually, the land of Canaan belonged to the Jews before it belonged to the Canaanites: *"Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan."*¹⁶³ So Abraham possessed the land of Canaan at approximately 2,000 BC. Later on, during the time of Jacob

162 Deuteronomy 11:12 (NKJV)

163 Genesis 12:5 (NKJV)

and his twelve sons, the Israelites migrated to Egypt due to the severe famine: *“So all countries came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine was severe in all lands.”*¹⁶⁴ As they lived in Egypt for about four centuries, they eventually became slaves to the Egyptians and were then rescued by God, through Moses the Prophet, and went back to their original land of Canaan.

The Crucial Location of the Land

Why can't God choose another country for the Jews to live in? Why should they absolutely have this land? Well, not only is Canaan a fertile land, but it is also more importantly located in a very strategic area. It is in the middle of the ancient world and enjoys easy access to the sea. These points are quite important considering the fact that Israel was the center of both Judaism and Christianity and provided relatively easy access to other countries for preaching purposes. This actually came in quite handy in early Christianity, as the first century apostles and saints travelled the Roman Empire and the ancient world to preach the Good News. This location of the land was critical to the early conversion of many around the world. Israel was in the middle of the Roman Empire providing land

164 Genesis 41:57 (NKJV)

access to the northern and southern part of the empire. This is in no way a mere coincidence. This is God's Wisdom. Truly God's ways are higher than our ways and His plans majestic and unconceivable!

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen that God is unchangeable; He is the same in the Old and New Testaments. God was, is and will always be Love. He created us to enjoy Him, gave us a deep desire for life and a true heavenly purpose. Out of this love, He gave us a free will to love Him back or not. Unfortunately, starting with the sin of Adam and Eve, mankind has often chosen to reject God, searching in vain for other ways to be satisfied. In His Foreknowledge, God had prepared a plan for salvation to grant us back this eternal life, which we had lost as the consequence of sin. God the Son therefore became Man and suffered for our sakes that through His death and resurrection, we may be reconciled with Him once more. This plan of salvation which started in the Old Testament involved God being patient with humanity as we progressively grew. He chose the Jewish nation and taught them, through His Law, to lead the world in morality. During this time, as humankind was quite weak due to the propagation of sin, God allowed for a temporary Law to serve as a bridge between the lawlessness

humanity was living in at the time and the Perfected Law of the New Testament. In the process, God tolerated violence, wars, divorce, and polygamy, things that were unheard of before the original sin. The entire Bible truly speaks about God's love for humanity and His plan to save us from our own mistakes. Oh, the Greatness of His Love! Although, by God's Grace, we tackled all the seemingly main issues. It would be quite impossible to provide a detailed explanation for each event incurred in the Old Testament. Actually that would imply we fully understood God's ways, which is of course quite untrue. The purpose of this book is for the reader to acquire a better understanding of the Old Testament, so she can be comfortable while reading it, trusting that God is in control and takes every action with sound and perfect judgment although the human mind does not always entirely understand the reasoning. In reality, it is not our job to question God, but it is our duty to worship Him in Spirit and Truth. It is our duty to submit our will and our lives to Him and in return, He will grant us to live a life of true purpose where true love, peace and joy are obtained through Him. May Glory be to Him, now and forever, Amen!

God has endured rejection, contempt, spitting, beatings, crown of thorns, and spear to His side and He was nailed to the cross and resurrected for our sakes. He did so for the salvation of every individual on this planet, saint and murderer alike. Yes, even the murderer! What Great Love! This Love is remarkably noticeable in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels, where one can only imagine an All-Patient, All-Caring, All-Loving God that willingly gives His priceless life for us, His weak creation. On the other hand, a quick glimpse at the Old Testament could easily distort this image and lead some people to believe that the Old Testament God is quite unloving or even cruel. How can the God that commands to give the other cheek allow for someone to be stoned because of a sin? How can God that asks to bless those who curse us, allow the flood to annihilate the people that He supposedly cares for? How is it possible that the same God that felt sympathy for the hungry five thousand men in addition to their families utterly destroy Sodom and Gomorrah in one night? Tough questions indeed! However, by the Grace of God, this book was written to appease the reader, answer these questions and develop our understanding of the Old Testament.

Fr. Gabriel Wissa

“The Lord is righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works” (Psalm 145:17). This book is written to emphasize this truth about God by removing any confusion about the exact real reasons lying behind the dilemmas that seem to be cruel and that puzzle man in all generations.

I pray God to bless its author... who, guided by the Holy Spirit, felt the importance of tackling such a confusing topic and made a great effort to explain and simplify some of the difficult passages of the Holy Bible. I also pray the Holy Spirit to enlighten the mind of every reader of this book, and to give him a deeper knowledge about the loving nature of the almighty God to whom is glory forever Amen.

HG Bishop Youssef

Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

