

411 An answer to my plea (reprise of 126)

Rachel, plus another reader, reminded me that Greg Boyd is the man to turn to. His *Cross Vision* isn't an easy read, and it doesn't give 'the answer' to OT violence (there isn't one), but it gives us a better way of viewing the OT. His book gives the biblical reasoning, but I gave^[126] some (possibly helpful?) background by looking at the overall progression from Abraham to today:

Having seen Jesus' self-sacrificial life, death and resurrection, we now know for certain that God is incredibly loving and desperately wants to forgive and heal and restore the whole human race. Millennia ago people didn't have our Jesus-inspired hindsight.

So, think back 4000 years, and put yourself in God's shoes. You want people of *all nations* to know how much you love them, and you want to draw them into a loving, covenant relationship, but you have a very big problem.

The religions of the Ancient Near East (ANE) all saw gods as remote, controlling and punishing. If you wanted to have enough to eat and not to have all your children die young you had to make offerings (even human sacrifices!) to your deity.

You (God) want to show people *what you're really like*, so you look for someone who might be receptive to seeing things differently. Abram and Sarai are praying desperately, because they don't have children,^[Gen 11] so you take them on a journey. They leave their homeland,^[Gen 12] and have to trust you to guide them; you even promise them that they will become a great nation. They trust you and step out in faith – a good start.

Sadly, they do a couple of devious things,^[Gen 12] and have a few adventures,^[13,14] so you send them a messenger, Melchizedek.^[14] As their faith wavers, you repeat your promise of being a great nation.^[14] Their faith in you wavers again,^[16] and they try to manipulate things, so you *again* repeat your promise.^[17] You even visit them yourselves (sic) as three visitors,^[18] but Sarah doubts again. They have various problems, including a natural disaster,^[19] which (as true ANE people) they interpret as your punishment. Then they indulge in yet more devious behaviour.^[20]

It's really not going well, but being incredibly patient and loving, you persevere. Finally, they become relaxed in their trust in you; indeed, so relaxed that they conceive!^[21]

You want them to see *what you're really like*, so you try to change their ingrained ANE thinking, but in a rather extreme way: you tell Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac as a burnt offering. Really?!^[22] Why would Abraham – even for one *second* – agree to this? I can only suppose that he thought, 'I trusted God and he gave me Isaac. If I continue to trust him, I guess he'll give me another son to replace Isaac.' What an amazing man of faith!

Yes, Abraham had incredible faith, but he still had his ANE mindset: he still thought that God might require human sacrifices. He still hadn't realised *what you're really like*.

And the ANE mindset is there right through to Moses and beyond. You patiently tried to wean them off, but it's an uphill battle to change people's views. What's more, even the people who wrote the OT had an ANE mindset; they hadn't yet realised *what you're really like*.

Your only solution (other than lobotomising the authors) was to *inspire* them in their writing, so you drop hint after hint about your love. Those clues, like a trail of breadcrumbs, are laid for people in later generations to follow (and for Jesus to then fulfil). OK, they are hidden amidst an ANE-centred view of God, but they are there for those with eyes to see (or ‘He who has ears to hear...’). Truly the Scriptures are God-breathed.

All sorted now, God? Improving, yes, but there were still problems. All went well for the first couple of AD centuries, but as the church gained in power, gradually the ANE thinking began to reassert itself; the punishment-based view of God was sadly still alive and well.

And in the 21st century? Is it possible, like Abraham, to have *really strong faith* and yet still to view God in ANE terms? Sadly, yes: I did so for almost 50 years. I knew something was wrong, and I was unhappy with my faith; thankfully I now know why.

Do give *Cross Vision* a try – hard work, but worthwhile.

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