



“Access to Jesus”

Joshua 8:18, 21-26; Matthew 5:38–42 (NRSV)

How do we come to know Jesus?

This week, we turn to another controversy that threatened to divide the early church, even as we acknowledge that division and heresy are with us still. Five years ago, Ross Douthat, a columnist at the New York Times, published an important and relevant book titled, *Bad Religion*. His subtitle, “How we became a nation of heretics,” set the stage well. He was a brave man to use the “H” word. Countless moral wrongs have

been committed in the name of heresy, but it remains an important word. One of the books on my shelves is titled *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why it matters what Christians believe*.¹ In part, the growing weaknesses in American Christianity can be traced to our loss of confidence that what we believe about God and his work really matters.

What does “heresy” mean? To go back to last week, a heresy is a distorted, vulnerable, and fragile form of Christianity that cannot sustain itself. In the early centuries it was a series of heresies that threatened the church and, despite much work to combat them, they endure still. Why? Because they are all deceptively sensible; all the heresies arose as answers to the deepest mysteries of our faith. The heresies provided wrong answers to our questions, but at least they were answers and often very appealing answers. Heresies are how a bug light must look to a bug – just so right, enticing us to our death. This week, we turn to a movement in the second century called Marcionism, after Marcion, a prominent and wealthy Christian.

You can see the problem for yourself. Take a few moments and look at the passage from Judges that begins this study. If you’re like me, it is impossible to see anything at all of Jesus in the God depicted in those verses. That’s the problem – it seems so easy to see two Gods in the Bible. A vengeful God of wrath and blood in the Old Testament and a god of peace and love in New Testament. That is exactly what Marcion believed he saw nearly 1,900 years ago. And many Christians today have some understandable sympathy for Marcion’s view.

Marcion

In the middle of the second century AD, little more than a century after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Marcion, a ship owner from Asia Minor, came to Rome and asked questions. His answer was to begin teaching a surprising brand of the Christian message. He believed that there was a total discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, between the god of the Old Testament and Jesus, the God of the New Testament. Marcion wanted to get rid of the Old Testament entirely, believing that the god depicted in it was a lesser god and unworthy of Christian worship. Obviously, since the Hebrew Scriptures are part of every Bible today, Marcion’s ideas were rejected.

For, of course there is only one God, the Lord God who is revealed fully in Jesus of Nazareth. The entire biblical story beginning in Genesis 12 with Abraham is the story of God’s forming and pursuing a people through whom humanity would be reconciled to God. It is the story of a covenant between God and his people, a covenant that was kept by one faithful Jew named Jesus. Take away the Old Testament and the story of Jesus makes no sense at all. The very word “Christ” plants you in the midst of the Old Testament.²

Thus, Marcion found himself excommunicated. But the problem lingers still. How could God sanction, even order, the genocidal warfare described in Judges and elsewhere? Must Sodom and Gomorrah really have been completely and utterly destroyed? Who is this God whose law seems to be an eye for an eye rather than turn the other cheek?

There are many facets to these questions. Here’s a couple of thoughts that we don’t have the space to pursue further in this study:

- We need to remember that the ancient world was a harsh and violent place. Life was cheap. Slavery was commonplace. Imagine living in the world of Conan the Barbarian. God has to deal with us as we are, not as we wish we were.
- In the ancient world, the kings were also the supreme warriors and commanders. Thus, we should expect that because the God of Israel was also to be their king, it is God who fills the role of warrior and commander. This imagery carries over to the New Testament as well. In Revelation, for example, Jesus is the divine warrior on the white horse, commanding the angel armies. It surprises people to learn that the “Lord of Hosts” is a military title; “hosts” is an old word for armies.
- For the ancients, the gods were the first cause of nearly all that happened. It rained because the gods made it rain. The tree fell on your neighbor because he had made the gods angry. They had little conception of so-called “natural” causes of anything and this ignorance shaped their understanding of God. We have to let the ancient people be ancient and not pretend they had our scientific knowledge.
- There are countless examples in the Old Testament of God’s love and mercy. Two of my favorites are Hosea 2:13-15 and Micah 6:6-8, both written hundreds of years before Jesus. Once you learn how to see them, the Hebrew Scriptures are filled with signposts to the full nature of God we see in Jesus.

All this sets the stage for us to understand the Bible’s developing revelation of God – for we come to know more and more about God as the Bible progresses through the Old Testament into the New Testament.

¹ This is an anthology of essays, edited by Ben Quash and Michael Ward. Hendrickson Publishers, 2007.

² “Christ” comes from the Greek *christos* for the Hebrew word *mashia*/Messiah.

Progressive Revelation

When you first meet someone, do you know all there is to know about them? Of course not. You will come to know them over time, often a long time, and only to the extent that they open up and reveal themselves to you. We should count ourselves blessed if there is one person to whom we can reveal ourselves completely.

So it is with God. When Abraham first meets God, he learns something of who God is. But he doesn't even know God's name. God makes promises to Abraham, but he doesn't live to see those promises kept. Is God really as good at keeping promises as he is at making them?

Indeed, God isn't fully revealed until the coming of Jesus. The incarnation and Jesus' subsequent faithfulness to God and to the covenant reveals to us that God is truly the great promise-keeper. Likewise, before Jesus, none of God's people knew that God was inherently relational, the unity of one God comprised of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Abraham and Moses and Elijah would never have imagined such a thing. Neither would we . . . without Jesus. It is Jesus who reveals to us that God not only loves but is love in God's very being (more on this next week).

Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that some aspects of God are revealed slowly in Scripture over time. It isn't that God is growing or changing; it is just that he is letting his people know more and more about himself as they live with God over the centuries.

You might ask why God waits to reveal himself fully. Well, I think it is because God has to deal with us as we are. Here's an example of what I mean. In the Bible there is a developing revelation of forgiveness. I think you'll see the progression.

1. In Genesis 4:23-24, Lamech tells his wives that he will kill a young man for striking him. Lamech says he will be avenged seventy-seven times! Talk about unlimited vengeance. It is the world of Conan the Barbarian: you've killed my child and now we are going to kill every man, woman, and child in your village.
2. In such a world, the "eye for an eye" of Exodus 21:23-25 is at least proportional vengeance. It sounds so harsh to our ears, but it is real moral progress over the seventy-seven-fold vengeance of Lamech.
3. Indeed, Leviticus 19:18 (still in the Law of Moses) says "you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people." And in Deuteronomy, 32:35, God says "Vengeance is mine." Much the same is repeated in Proverbs 20:22. Vengeance is still in the picture, but it is to be handed over to God.
4. And, finally, God's fullest desires for us are revealed by Jesus. In Matthew 5:38, Jesus takes the law from "an eye for an eye" to turning the other cheek and going the second mile. And when Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive, Jesus tells him seventy-seven times,³ the perfect reversal of Lamech's desire for vengeance (Matthew 18:21-22).

It comes down to this, as it does in all things theological: Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God. When we see Jesus, we see God. When Jesus teaches, it is God teaching.

There are different ways of coming at the questions of God's depiction in the Old Testament. Perhaps, in the light of Christ, we are supposed to understand that the Hebrew writers ascribe actions to God that aren't really God's. Perhaps when Moses announces that God has instructed him to roar through the Israelite camp slaughtering thousands, it is Moses' anger on display, not God's.

But perhaps not. Perhaps we are supposed to understand that in that time and in that place God merely did what had to be done to preserve and protect a people, so that all the families of the earth could be blessed through them.

Perhaps . . . perhaps . . . there is no end to the perhaps. The Bible always has and always will pose enormous interpretive challenges. But through it all, we know this. God is no bully. God is not vindictive. God is not unjust or unforgiving. God is neither capricious nor megalomaniacal. How do we know this? Because we know Jesus.

³ In the Greek this can also be translated "seventy times seven," trumping Lamech's vengeance tenfold