

Even God Has Image Problems

8/7/2013

In a previous article (“God in Body Armor?” 3/18/13), I dismissed the God of Vengeance which the scripture, particularly the Jewish Scripture of the Christian Old Testament, exalts too loudly. My point in that article was that God is above vengeance and repayment. He is, after all, the Creator of the Universe. He has no real enemies with enough power to worry about. God is the *only* power in the universe, or rather, the only power which brings about the universe.

So, let me ask now, what is the point of depicting God in full battle gear?

I had the opportunity to read Psalm 115 tonight. It shed a little light on the question. The first stanza in the Guild translation (the translation used in my breviary) is:

Not to us, Lord, not to us,
but to your name give the glory
for the sake of your love and your truth,
lest the heathen say: “Where is their God?” (vv. 1-2)

In the contentious Middle East of the ancient times, a tribe or tribal state was identified with its god. When tribal groups battled, it was not the armies that won or lost, it was the tribal gods who conquered or were defeated. You’ll remember Moses standing on the hilltop, dawn to dusk, with his arms raised in prayer, in order that his invocation would move YHWH to defeat the enemy. And you’ll remember the Israelites bringing the Ark of the Covenant into camp the night before the Battle of Ebenezer and raising such a joyful roar that the Philistines were frightened by the power of Israel’s God. (1 Sam. 4.)

The general theme of Psalm 115 is that YHWH is the creator of the universe and has unlimited power to do all that he wills. On the other hand, all other tribal gods are mere idols, made of earthly materials, with no power at all. And so:

But our God is in the heavens;
he does whatever he wills.
Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths but they cannot speak;
they have eyes but they cannot see . . .” (vv. 3-5)

and so on.

If a tribe's god did not show himself or did not act on behalf of the tribe in any useful way, the tribe and its god were subject to mockery. Hence the mockery in verse 2 above, "Where is their God?" The poet is saying, "Give yourself glory, YHWH, by acting in a way that unquestionably manifests your power. Otherwise, the non-believers will scorn your existence."

Now, how does a tribal god under these circumstances manifest its power? There are just a few convincing ways. As above, the god might destroy the tribe's enemy, as YHWH convincingly does the Egyptian army pursuing Moses and his people into the Red Sea. (Exodus 14.) Or, the god might meet the desperate need of the people, such a famine or drought, as YHWH does when he causes water to flow lavishly from the rock. (Numbers 20.)

Or again, the god might heal the people from deadly misfortune, as YHWH did when venomous snakes attacked the people of Israel in the desert and he healed the victims with a metal image of the snakes—a powerless token in itself, but a symbol to the people of the power of YHWH. (Numbers 21.)

Or finally, the god might provide abundance for the people, as YHWH did again and again in the scriptures, for example, when he enriched the Israelites with donations of gold from the Egyptians as Moses led his people out of Egypt, and when YHWH led the Israelites to settle the land of Canaan.

So, in the ancient contest among tribes over whose god was the greatest, it was fitting, and perhaps necessary for the Jewish nation's self-respect, that YHWH should be dressed in his battle gear, the conqueror without equal. But how this image of God works its way into the Christian scriptures is a question of interest, because the investigation reveals an early Christian mindset that must be considered when reading the gospels.

Simply put, it was difficult for many of Jesus' disciples to give up their lifetime image of God, even after Jesus "turned things upside down," as my former pastor used to say. Jesus replaced the image of God as a conquering, vengeful, demanding king with the image of God as a father and shepherd. The old God of the Torah, who gave commandments and demanded obedience, was replaced by Jesus with the "Christian God" of love and forgiveness. For Jesus, God's retributive justice was trumped by his mercy. For Jesus, God was not interested in punishing people; God was interested in saving them—bringing them into union of spirit with himself.

That was Jesus' take on things. But his followers who were faithful Jews, raised in the traditions of their fathers, carried with them from their upbringing the ancient image of God as regal protector and provider, law-giver and judge. Jesus made clear to them that the God whom

Jesus knew and loved was not that stern, demanding deity of the ancient tradition—not the God who devastated the innocent population of the nation of Egypt in order that “they might know that I am the LORD and there is no other.” But Jesus’ God of love and mercy, the generous forgiver, the compassionate one who desires more than justice, who desires self-sacrificing love, is difficult to reconcile with the traditional image of the retributive God. And so, the two images of God—Jesus’ and tradition’s—coexisted uneasily in the hearts of many of his followers. This is most evident in the case of the John who wrote the Book of Revelation, in which God is depicted as a demanding king and military commander, redressing the crimes of the unbelievers against the Christian community and punishing these “enemies” of his.

The writer who most clearly distinguished the traditional God of the Jews from the radically new image of the God of Jesus was Paul of Tarsus. Because he recognized that his call from God was to be a missionary to the gentile nations, Paul soon had to confront the problem of leading the gentiles to know the God of Jesus without forcing them to obey the Mosaic Law ordained by this God. Paul wanted the gentiles to know God without subjecting them to what God told the Jewish nation—and everyone else who followed this God (the “God-fearers”)—to do.

Paul’s solution to the problem was to recognize that Jesus “fulfilled” the Mosaic Law by living flawlessly the “spirit” of this law, namely, that Jesus always honored the God whom he called his Father, and that Jesus lived perfectly the life of communal justice, compassion, and mercy toward which the Mosaic Law pointed every person who respected it. Paul reasoned that by fulfilling the “spirit of the law,” by living the truth of the fundamentals which underlay all the commandments and regulations, and in particular, by giving his own life in other-centered love as the ultimate sacrifice to God, Jesus had uniquely completed the demands of the Mosaic Law. He had achieved the purpose of the Law, and so he had rendered the Law no longer applicable. As a result, the followers of Jesus were made free of the Law with all its demands and obligations. They were free to love compassionately and with abandon. Now, there was no longer any need for circumcision, for dietary regulations, for sacrifices and Sabbath work regulations and temple taxes. All of that was now superseded by two simple ways of life: love God, and serve the legitimate needs of the people around you.

I think Paul saw this clearly, but perhaps few others also did. Peter did not. Peter felt responsible to the Mosaic Law and to its enforcers, even as he disregarded the Law when he was out of the enforcers’ sight, and for this Paul publicly chastised him. (Galatians 2.) And the apostle James became—in Paul’s eyes, at any rate—the emblem of that faction of the Christian community which insisted that new gentile Christians must first become Jews, according to the demands of the Mosaic Law. And we cannot exclude the evangelists, and in particular the writer of Matthew’s gospel, from holding to this same uncomfortable admixture of Jesus’ understanding of the Father and tradition’s image of YHWH.

So, the lesson to be drawn from these observations is that when we read the Christian scriptures, we must be careful to distinguish “the old from the new.” When God is pictured as the vengeful God who is bent on punishing people, especially non-Christians and persecutors of Christians, we must raise the question of the origins of this image. It is surely not the image which Jesus was conveying—the image typified by the father of the Prodigal Son and the shepherd who goes seeking the lost sheep.

I’ve suggested elsewhere that when we read the gospels, we must pay attention to the group to whom Jesus is addressing his teachings. I suggested that when he is teaching his already-trained apostles, he speaks mainly of mercy and compassion, rather than of judgment and condemnation. And so it is that he scorns the suggestion of James and John that they call down fire from heaven to consume a village that has rejected Jesus. (Luke 9:54-55.) Their suggestion is in perfect keeping with the traditional image of the vengeful God. But Jesus rebukes them. Destruction is not Jesus’ way. Jesus’ mission is not to judge but to save.

When Jesus addresses the crowds, on the other hand, he speaks their language—the language of the traditional image of God as law-giver and judge. And so, often as he is leading them to glimpse his knowledge of God as loving-kindness, mercy, and compassion, he puts this image of God into traditional terms. He talks of the life centered in goodness and loving justice, and contrasts that life with the life of self-centeredness and ignorance of the needs of others, which he tones with threats of scripture-style retribution.

To this previous observation, I now have to add the separate understanding presented in this essay, namely, that as we pay attention to the audience to whom Jesus’ teachings are directed, we must also pay attention to the mindset of the evangelist. We must recognize the influence of the traditional Jewish images of God on the writer’s portrayal of Jesus’ Father. (See, for example, Mt. 16:27. The NAB translation, “repay,” sounds pretty vengeful. The KJV and NIV render the same word as “reward.” The Greek word itself seems to have the meaning “to render what is due.” Retributive, yes, but not vengeful.)

What is truly new and therefore, most meaningful in Jesus’ teaching is his insistence that God is Father and shepherd, merciful, patient, joyful, forgiving, and seeking to love. The vengeful God who demands obedience from the weak, who punishes those in the grip of their emotions, who judges justly but without mercy, who condemns his creatures, created in love, to eternal separation from him—this is the God of tradition. That is the image of God which Jesus dispensed with, and replaced with the God of loving mercy who welcomes into his heart all who are willing, saints and sinners, strong and weak alike.