

DOES GOD LOVE A HITLER LESS THAN A NEW BORN BABY?

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We could address this question by going to the Book of Job. That book is an extended meditation on the collision of two unavoidable facts – the fact that we believe in a loving God collides with the fact that good people are sometimes crushed and wicked people sometimes thrive. Although we are not going to focus on that particular book here, it will be helpful to keep it in mind. We Christians are sometimes reticent to enter that scandalous territory with Job. The words of Job himself remind us to stand before the Mystery in courage and hope:

Then Job answered the LORD:
'I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

.....

I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

.....

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you.' (Job 42:1-5. NRSV)

Pat Robertson, the well-known American televangelist, manifested quite a different way of thinking recently. On January 13 2010, while speaking on the Christian Broadcasting Network's "700 Club" in the United States, he said that the people in Haiti had made a pact with the devil and then suggested that the earthquake – which has probably killed in excess of 200,000 people – is God's punishment.

I doubt there are many Christians who would be prepared to agree with Pat Robertson on this. However, there is, I believe, a widespread moralism in the Christian culture that might actually be closer to Robertson than Job. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this is the belief in the gospel of health and wealth, found predominantly amongst evangelicals, particularly in the USA. According to this belief, God loves us and it is not His will that we be poor or sick, therefore if we "claim" this "truth," health and wealth will be ours.

A more subtle form of this same kind of thinking can be found in the Catholic tradition. At the risk of being simplistic, it goes something like this:

If you behave yourself (ie do the "right thing"), God will love you and you will be rewarded by God. If you do not behave yourself (ie do not do the "right thing"), God will not love you and you will be punished by God.

In this presentation I am going to argue that the reward-punishment approach to God – no matter how gauche or how subtle – does not do justice to Divine Revelation. More importantly, I am going to argue that God’s love is unchanging and unchangeable, that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more or less. Stark as it might sound, I do believe God loves a Hitler with the same infinite love that God loves a newborn infant.

This raises at least three critical issues.

First and foremost, it raises the issue of *interpretation* of the Sacred Scriptures. For example, there are many texts – in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures – which speak of our relationship with God in terms of reward and punishment. Just this week, for instance, the Liturgy of the Word gives us the story of David’s terrible choice in 2Samuel 24. (Wednesday of the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time, Cycle II.) The story begins with God’s anger blazing out against the Israelites. God incites David to take a census. Why, we do not know. David takes the census and is punished for it. He gets the choice of punishments: Three years of famine on the land or flight for three months before their enemies or three days’ pestilence in the land. David chooses pestilence. God duly sends the pestilence and seventy thousand men die. On Ash Wednesday this year we hear the reading from the Gospel of Matthew (6:1-6) where we are promised that God rewards us when we give alms in secret and pray in secret. And of course there is the powerful Last Judgment scene as portrayed in the same Gospel (see 25:31-46). Surely we cannot avoid thinking of our relationship with God in terms of reward and punishment?

The other two issues are more concrete and more obviously interrelated. The second issue is that of *motivation*. Put simply, why be good if God is going to love me anyway? The third issue is that of *accountability*. If we do not think in terms of reward and punishment, how is wickedness dealt with, whether it is responsibility for the ordinary transgressions of folks like you and me or responsibility for the horrendous transgressions of monsters like Hitler?

Before we address these three issues, however, I will reflect briefly on what I believe to be the two primary streams of thought about God found in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures.



There is a story told of a young newly-ordained Irish priest sent to Australia in the 1950s. He finds himself appointed to a huge parish in Western Sydney. The parish priest is a wonderfully kind man but a bit gruff. In his first conversation with the young Irish priest, he asks, “Did they teach you how to preach in the seminary?” “Indeed they did. We had a whole course on preaching,” the young priest answers. “Well you can forget everything they told you,” says the parish priest. “The people here are good, simple, down to earth folk. Many of them don’t understand English too well. What you need is tricks to get their attention. For example, you might say, ‘I’m in love with a beautiful woman’ and pause. When they’re all looking at you, say, ‘Yes. I’m in love with Mary, the Mother of Jesus.’ You need to have some tricks up your sleeve son, not theological analysis or pious exhortation.”

That Sunday the church is packed. The congregation is restless and noisy as normal. As the young priest climbs nervously into the pulpit, out of the corner of his eye he catches sight of the imposing figure of the parish priest standing in the sacristy. His mind goes blank. He blurts out: “The parish priest is in love with a beautiful woman.” He stops and stares at the sea of expectant faces. After a long pause, he stammers, “And for the life of me I can’t remember her name!”

I would like to speak of two beautiful women and what they tell us of God’s love. The first is my mother – who died on April 26 2009 – and the second is Joy Lauer, wife of Tony Lauer, the former Commissioner for Police in NSW.

One day in January 1962, I was travelling back from Lighthouse Beach in Ballina with my family. There should have been thirteen of us in that Ford Customline – Mum and dad and eleven children. As it turned out, there were only twelve of us.

When we were about seven or eight kilometres from the beach, someone asked where Paul was. Paul was the baby, eighteen months old. It seems we had left him on the beach. When this fact became known in the car, my mother cried out, “Oh my baby!” Now, you should know that my mother was a very reserved sort of person, she did not easily manifest her emotions. But I can still hear her cry at that moment.

In the First Book of Kings (3:16-28) we hear the same cry from a mother. You know the story. There are two mothers, each with a baby. One mother accidentally rolls on her baby in the night and smothers it. She claims the other baby. Solomon must show his wisdom in deciding which one is really the mother of this surviving baby. He suggests cutting the living baby in half, knowing full well that the real mother will react instantly to that suggestion. The King James Version says it well: “Her bowels yearned upon her son.”

The Hebrew word used here – and translated as “bowels” – is *r^ech^em*. It is frequently used to refer particularly to the womb or more generally to the viscera. By extension various forms of the word came to mean “to have compassion.” In the story of the Covenant as outlined in Exodus 33:18-34:9, the word is applied to God three different times – twice in 33:19 and once in 34:6. This is echoed beautifully in Isaiah 49:15-16:

Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion (*r^ah^am*) for the child of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands. (NRSV)

(It is beyond the scope of this presentation to attempt anything like a thorough discussion of the Hebrew word *r^ech^em* and its cognates. For such a scholarly discussion see Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament, Volume 3*, translated Mark E Biddle, Hendrickson Publishers, 1997, 1225-1230.)

We might call this *visceral* love. The Hebrew Bible has no hesitation in saying that God’s love for us is like this. In the Christian Scriptures we have a similar description

given to Jesus. For example in Matthew 9:36 – when Jesus saw the crowd “like sheep without a shepherd” – the Jerusalem Bible says “he *felt sorry* for them.” The Greek word is *esplagchnisthē* and it comes from the word *splagchna* meaning the nobler viscera – heart, lungs, liver and intestines. In passing we might note the weakness of the English translation. English words like “sorry,” “pity” and “compassion” hardly do justice to the deep, visceral content of these words as used in the world of Palestine – then as now.

With three notable exceptions – for example, the father of the prodigal son is “moved with compassion” when he sees the returning son on the horizon – the word and its cognates are always used of Jesus.

(For a more complete discussion of this concept see William Barclay, *New Testament Words*, SCM Press, 1955/1980, 276-280. See also Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, editors, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, William B Eerdmans, 1994, 265-266.)

Joy Lauer appeared on the ABC TV program, “Australian Story,” in March of 2003. Joy and her husband Tony, adopted a girl, Tanya, about fifteen years after the birth of the last of their three children. Tanya was an attractive and talented young girl but she became addicted to heroin. When Tanya had three children of her own – the eldest was twelve and the youngest was eighteen months – the State moved to place those children in foster care. To prevent that, Joy and Tony Lauer – now in their mid-sixties – adopted Tanya’s three young children.

There is a beautiful and powerful moment in the interview in which Joy speaks of her relationship with Tanya:

People sort of say to you, ‘Look, why do you bother with her? She’s an addict. She’s always going to be an addict. Once an addict always an addict.’ But they’re your children. You don’t get a guarantee when you take children on. You don’t get a guarantee they’re all going to turn out right. You give them a good education. Do you then say, when they don’t take the path you hope they will, ‘Well, I’m finished with you, out you go’? You love them. You love them for what they are. And I can’t turn that off. I love my children with a passion. And I love my grandchildren the same way. And drugs haven’t changed that. I can’t turn my love off for Tanya. Even though she’s not my flesh, I love her.

(From the transcript available on the internet at www.abc.net.au/austory/content/2003/s932510.htm.)

In the Hebrew Bible, the Prophet Hosea is asked to take a prostitute as his wife. He is to be faithful to her even though she is not faithful to him. The significant word used of this relationship is *h^es^ed*. (For a more complete discussion of this concept, see Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *opc it*, Vol. 3, 449-464.) The nearest English word is “kindness.” *H^es^ed* is generally used with the word *m^et* meaning “faithfulness.” Together they point to a faithful, committed love. For example, Abraham’s servant, speaking to Isaac’s wife-to-be (Genesis 24:27) and God speaking to Moses in renewing the covenant (Exodus 34:6). The concept is repeated a number of times in the Psalms, for example Psalm 25:10, 40:11, 61:7, 85:10, 86:15, 89:14,

115:1, 117:2 and Psalm 118 where the phrase, “His love is everlasting!” is repeated in the first four verses.

We might call this *deliberate* love. The Hebrew Bible has no hesitation in using the example of the prophet Hosea’s deliberate choice of a prostitute as his wife to describe how God loves us. Psalm 103 has a beautiful intermingling of the visceral with the deliberate:

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love (*h^es^ed*) and mercy (*r^ah^am*)
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. (Verses 1-5. NRSV)

Verses 8-17 of this same Psalm, where the word *h^es^ed* is repeated three more times in verses 8, 11 and 16 and the word *r^ah^am* is used again in verse 13, could, I believe, be read as a summary of the covenant.

The Gospel of John puts it about as concisely as possible,

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16. NRSV.)



We must now turn to the three critical issues mentioned earlier. It will be helpful, however, if we recognise some basic limits and possibilities as we approach those issues.

I begin with a quaint expression of Fr Austin Woodbury, the founder of the Aquinas Academy. He said we must never forget that our language about God is always “likey, notty and morey.” That is, whatever we say about God, it is *like* this, it is *not* this, it is *more than* this. Thus, if I say, “God is love,” I am actually saying something like this; “Go to the lookout called ‘love’ – not the lookout called ‘hate’ – and gaze towards the horizon of ‘love’ as we understand it and you will get a faint inkling – ‘in a glass darkly’ (1Corinthians 13:12) – of what God might be like.”

Recall the story of Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush. (Exodus 3:1-15.) Along with the promise, “I will be with you” in verse 12, there is the wonderfully tantalizing revelation of God that simply invites us to stand unknowing before the Mystery in verse 14. (Scholars are uncertain of the exact meaning of the so-called Tetragrammaton, or the “four letters,” YHWH. Most English translations say “I AM WHO I AM” or something similar. Interestingly, the KJV says, “I AM THAT I

AM.”) John Courtney Murray, that remarkable Jesuit scholar who contributed so much to the Second Vatican Council, says of this passage from Exodus:

The text (Ex 3:1-15) Contains a threefold revelation – of God’s immanence in history, of his transcendence to history, and of his transparence through history. God first asserts the fact of his presence in the history of his people: ‘I shall be there.’ Second, he asserts the mystery of his own being: ‘I shall be there as who I am.’ His mystery is a mode of absence. Third, he asserts that, despite his absence in mystery, he will make himself known to his people: ‘As who I am shall I be there.’ The mode of his transparence is through his action, through the saving events of the sacred history of Israel. However, what thus becomes known is only his saving will. He himself, in his being and nature, remains forever unknown to men, hidden from them. (John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today*, Yale University Press, 1964/1977, 10f.)

I will now consider each of the issues raised, beginning with the last and working back to the first.

The third of the issues raised – that of *accountability* – is I believe the most intractable. There is, in the end, no satisfactory answer. Yes, every thoughtful and honest adult knows something of his or her accountability for decisions and actions taken. Indeed it is a sign of maturity to accept accountability for one’s decisions and actions. Likewise, law and order in the community demands that we hold people accountable for their actions. But this takes us so far. When wicked or simply shrewd people take the reins of power – as Hitler and the Nazis did – any accountability we might expect or even demand, fails us. How then are people like Hitler held accountability?

In the face of such a question, there is no adequate answer. We simply do not know the answer to this question and we should not pretend that we do. Like Job we stand before the Mystery of God in trust. We trust the promise, “I am with you,” and we trust the Subject of that promise. In the end, we accept the crucifying experience of absence. Jesus’ cry of desolation comes to mind: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (See Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. See also Psalm 22:1.)

The second issue – that of *motivation* – calls for and allows a practical and realistic response. The motivation for seeking the good and the true and aligning my life with those, is firstly that such an orientation is the best way to thrive as a human being. We do not thrive in hatred and spitefulness and deceit and violence etc. Rather we thrive in love and care and honesty and forgiveness etc. Our deepest longings are for these. We are in fact repelled by the prospect of aligning ourselves with evil. Of course, thriving as a human being in this way might put you at odds with a particular society or culture. For example, many good men and women found themselves the victims of the hatred that Hitler and his agents unleashed in Germany. However, this is no reason to abandon the conviction that it is in our best interests as human beings to always seek the good and the true, no matter what the cost.

There is, I believe, an even deeper reason for seeking the good and true. The more I align myself with the good and true, the more I will recognise and actually know the

Good and the True as such. I will gradually and increasingly come to know God and God's infinite love and that this love of God is unchanging and unchangeable, that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more or less. I can of course act in ways that will disconnect me from God's love, ways that might lead me to feel that I am not loved unconditionally. I suggest that would be hell. The choice is mine. God's choice has already been made and it is the choice to love you and me infinitely.

The third issue – that of interpretation – likewise calls for and allows a practical and realistic response. We find some valuable guidance in our Catholic tradition in approaching this issue of interpretation.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives us a guiding principle for interpreting the Sacred Scriptures:

The Christian faith is not a 'religion of the book.' Christianity is the religion of the 'Word' of God, a word which is 'not a written and mute word, but the Word is incarnate and living.' (St. Bernard, *S. missus est hom.* 4, 11: PL 183, 86.) If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, 'open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures' (cf Luke 24:45). (No 108.)

In the word we seek the Word. This seeking cannot be done without the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The word of Scripture is potentially a special place of intimacy with the Word who seeks to abide with us and in us. (For example, John 15:4: "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you.")

The opening comments of Pope Benedict XVI, in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, offer a further significant guidance:

"God is love, and if you who abide in love you abide in God, and God abides in you" (*1 Jn* 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of humankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us". *We have come to believe in God's love*: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his or her life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should ... have eternal life" (3:16).

In the Church's tradition, there is a very special ritual process for enabling this encounter with the Word. We call it *lectio divina*. This is primarily a communal activity in which the Scriptures are proclaimed and meditated in the assembly of believers. Time is given to being still and listening. The word is "chewed" like a ruminant chewing on its cud – to use a metaphor common in medieval writings – and the texts' nutrition seeps into the community's bloodstream.

The Liturgy of the Word in the celebration of the Eucharist is obviously a primary context for *lectio divina*. Individuals are encouraged to do this in private as well. Scholarly study of the Scriptures emerges from and flows back into *lectio divina*. Thus one modern writer speaks of this practice, referring to another metaphor commonly used in the early writings about reading the Scriptures, that of the mirror:

If all things bear the marks of their maker, of none of them, save man, is it said that it is made in his image. Evidently, then, the man who would draw near to God would do well to attend to what he can see in his image. Once he has taken up this standpoint, he will eventually discover himself in a mirror-filled room. For, apart from what God holds up to him in the universal features of his human nature, there is that other portrait of himself that God holds up to man in holy Scripture, where we shall find not only God revealing himself, but also the features, comely and unpleasant alike, of man to whom the revelation is made. We too often fail to realize that one of the primary purposes of holy Scripture, considered as a vital whole, is to show man to himself, as he was made and as he has become, as he acts and reacts in relation to his maker, with *nothing* left out. Hence the violence and crudity and sensuality that God there pushes in front of our noses, even if we would, to our very great danger, prefer to turn away. The God of the Bible does not whittle down the truth, and we must not try to do so either. (Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers*, SPCK, 1973, 10-11.)

With this in mind, let us take up the story of Jephthah from chapter eleven of the Book of Judges. I believe it can offer us a paradigm case for addressing the issue of interpretation.

Jephthah is the son of a prostitute. His step brothers cast him out because of this. But Jephthah is also a great warrior. When the Ammonites attack the Israelites over a land claim, the elders seek Jephthah's help. At first he is reluctant because of the earlier rejection. However, the elders agree to make him their leader if he will fight with them against the Ammonites. Jephthah agrees and seeks a negotiated settlement with the Ammonites. The Ammonites refuse negotiations so Jephthah launches an attack. Before he does this however, he promises Yahweh that, if Yahweh gives the victory to Israel, he will offer up as a holocaust the first person to come out from his house to meet him on return. The Israelites win the fight and Jephthah is greeted by his only daughter on his return. The daughter is allowed to "bewail her virginity" for two months before Jephthah treated her "as the vow he had uttered bound him."

What are we to make of such a story and the many like it in both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures? Are we to assume that God is well described by such stories that are so clearly extensions of the immediate human experience?

I do not believe we have to accept, on face value, the suggestion that God gave the victory to the Israelites and demanded the holocaust of Jephthah's daughter in return. This would fly in the face of the revelation of God in and through the covenant of love.

First and foremost, this is a very human story. This story – like all the other stories of reward and punishment in the Bible – tells us much more about a particular group of human beings, their peculiar expectations and their cultural practices than it tells us of

God. It might be useful to remember Luke's image of the birth of the Saviour in the stable. The Eternal Word is born amidst the mud and the straw, the chaos and the stench. Throughout history the Word is seeking to be born in the mud and the straw, the chaos and the stench of human affairs. We must expect that. We must listen for that as a community. We must not blame God for the mud and the straw, the chaos and the stench. We must also maintain our conviction that God is Love. God always was and always will be Love, eternal, infinite, unchanging, unchangeable, unconditional Love.



St John of the Cross, one of the greatest spiritual guides in the Christian tradition, sees our life in Christ potentially reaching a point “where there is no longer any way because for the just man there is no law, he is a law unto himself.” (“The Ascent of Mount Carmel,” *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCD and Otilio Rodriguez OCD, Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1973, 67.) As we mature, and we are stripped of our fears and pretences and fictions and compulsions that stand between us and the love of God, reward and punishment become less and less an issue.

Reward and punishment prevail in our treatment of brute animals. Reward and punishment are somewhat important in the life of children and the immature. But we expect adults to be motivated by something beyond reward and punishment. It is a mark of maturity to behave according to principle, even when it costs us. More particularly, it is a mark of a mature Christian life to be moved primarily by the experience of God's love and to go where that takes us, no matter what the immediate outcome.

Now it may be the case that very few people reach this kind of maturity. That is not the point. The point is that this level of maturity is available to us as human beings. A life beyond the expectations of reward and punishment is potentially ours. Surely it is entirely appropriate to think of our relationship with God as being beyond reward and punishment also?

I conclude with a note from Pope John Paul I:

God is our father: even more, God is our mother. God does not want to hurt us, but only to do good for us, all of us. If children are ill, they have additional claim to be loved by their mother. And we too, if by chance we are sick with badness and are on the wrong track, have yet another claim to be loved by the Lord. (*Osservatore Romano*, September 21 1978.)

