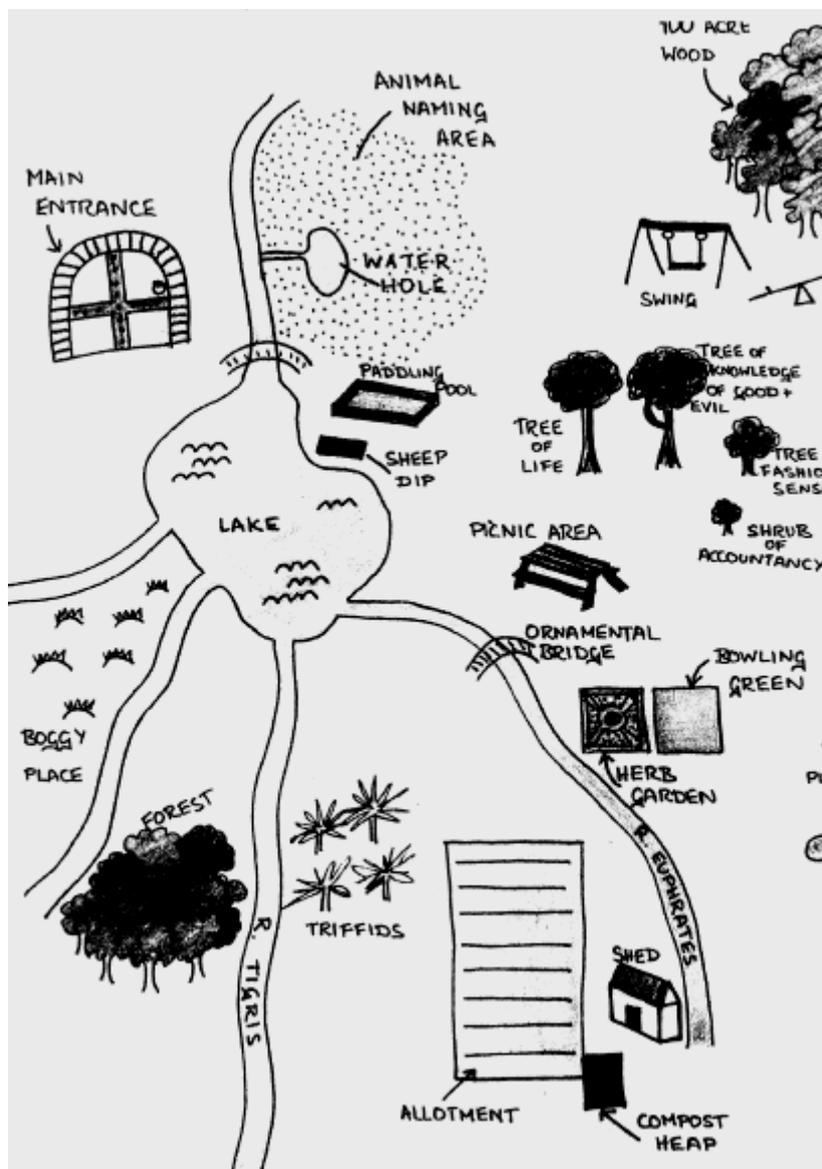


WHY IS THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PORTRAYED AS ONE WHO KILLS PEOPLE?

(Genesis 3.8-24 and Exodus 19.1-8)

Let's start at the very beginning – a very good place to start!

Here's where Adam lived (see below). Can you spot the front door, the watering place for the animals, the bowling green, Adam and Eve's picnic table, and, of course, the tree of life and the tree of knowing good and evil.



Did you know the Adam kept a diary? He did: and against all the odds I have been able to get hold of a copy of it. Here are some of the entries:

Day 1: Went for walk. Frankly I could do with someone else to talk to. I've tried chatting to the llama but he just chews and spits. What's the point?

Day 2: Put up a sign by the tree of knowledge of good and evil 'No nibbling – by order' Changed it later to 'Do not eat'... Had a chat with G this afternoon re. the companion problem. He seemed to understand. He suggested I sleep on it.

Day 3: An amazing thing has happened. This wonderful creature has appeared. She is a lot smoother than I am and had some extra attachments. Think they may be some sort of buoyancy aid, but don't know for certain. I haven't quite made my mind up what to call it. It's a toss-up between 'Eve' and 'Norman'. Decided on 'Eve'

Day 8: Disaster! Eve has eaten the apple.

Day 9: Not one of my brighter days. I shouldn't be depressed; I'm only 9 days old for heaven's sake. I shouldn't have eaten that apple either. It was her fault. Nothing to do with me. She talked me into it. She knows I can't resist apple crumble.

Day 10: Packing

That's a new take on our first reading. A perfect world created by a perfect and holy and loving God. A disobedient Eve who thinks she knows better than God and a weak, pathetic Adam who can't stand up for God and doesn't do what God tells him. Theologians call it 'The Fall of Man' or 'Original Sin' – human beings' inherent inability to live up to God's standards; OUR inability to live up to God's standards.

Like us, Adam and Eve had a choice – to obey God or to do their own thing. But why did the all-powerful God give human beings that choice? Nicky Gumbel, a former barrister and then a minister at Holy Trinity, Brompton, where the Alpha course was born explains it like this:

...It's because he loves us and wanted to give us free will. Love is not love if it is forced; it can only be love if there is a real choice. God gave human beings the choice and the freedom to love or not to love.

A working mum needed someone to pick up her 6 year old daughter from school and look after her until she got back from work. She advertised for someone and a lady replied and agreed to do just that for £50 per week. That

was the deal. Lawyers would call it a contract. All went well for a while but one day the childminder did not pick up the little girl. One of the teachers took her home and looked after her. The childminder said she was very sorry and that it would not happen again. *OK, said the mother, but make sure it does not happen again.* All went well for a few weeks but then it happened again. *I'm awfully sorry said the childminder – I fell asleep. Give me another chance please.* The mother, against her every instinct, did so. But it did happen again and that was it! The childminder had broken her contract three times and she was not to be given another chance.

In our reading from Exodus God did a deal. He entered into a contract with the Israelites – *If you obey me and keep my covenant then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

And a few verses later the people promised: *We will do everything the Lord has said.* So the deal was struck; the contract was made.

God's chosen people, like the childminder, broke their contract, not once or twice, or three times like our childminder, but time and time again. If it had not been 48 verses long, I would have had Psalm 106 as one of our readings. Why? Because it sets out a long list of the times – only some of the times - when the Israelites broke the contract and stepped out of line: and it records what happened as a result of their disobedience – deaths, plagues, being conquered, being sent into slavery. Let's look at just one verse as an example: *They yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor and ate sacrifices offered to lifeless gods. They provoked the Lord to anger by their wicked deeds and a plague broke out among them.*

It was not as if the Israelites had not been warned time and time again. Many of the prophets did just that. We had a sermon series on the book of Amos not long ago – heavy with dire warnings and pleas for repentance. Isaiah and Jeremiah are similar but a lot longer.

You will hear two sets of statistics in this talk. Here is statistic number 1:
85% of children exhibiting behavioural disorders are from fatherless homes.
90% of homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes.
80% of rapists motivated by displaced anger are from fatherless homes.
70% of all juveniles in detention centres come from fatherless homes
85% of youths sitting in prison grew up in fatherless homes.

The report in which these figures appeared ends with this devastating conclusion: *Pick a social ill at random; suicide, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse...and you will find that the correlation with fatherlessness is clear and direct.*

God is our loving father. God was the loving father of his chosen people. You will remember that, way back in Genesis 17, God promised something to Abraham, who obeyed God even to the point of being poised to sacrifice his son. That promise was that Abraham's descendants would be God's special people.

So what do loving fathers do? They guide and nurture and discipline their children out of love. Children who are loved know that if they step out of line, certain consequences will follow for their own good – so they will not become part of that shocking first set of statistics

So we have two interlocking relationships between God and his people. One is contractual with grim and unwanted consequences following the breaking of the contract. The other is the father/child relationship, the one loving and caring for the other, that love and care involving of necessity a degree of discipline.

As we have seen, Psalm 106 pictures God as the wronged party to a breach of contract. Psalm 136 pictures him in his role as a loving creator and father. The first three verses of Psalm 136 start: *Give thanks to the Lord.* Each of the succeeding 23 verses refers to how God helped and rescued his people and each of those verses ends with these words: *His love endures for ever.*

In that Psalm those words, *His love endures for ever*, are a response to God's actions in things like his rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt and leading them into the land *flowing with milk and honey*. But they could equally have been directed to the way in which God eventually forgave his people's failure to keep their side of the contract; and that was not just the three times our mother took her childminder back, but every time - once they had experienced the consequences of their broken promise.

The Old Testament tells the story of God's relationship with his chosen people – a story of a loving creator God and his rebellious people who, despite warnings about what would happen, thought they knew best and had to be shown time without number that they were wrong.

Today's BIG QUESTION is: Why in the Old Testament is God portrayed as someone who kills people?

I said there would be two sets of statistics in this talk. Here is the second:

In the Old Testament there are over 900 references to killing. Fewer than 10 describe God as the actual killer and of those, only two clearly attribute death directly to God. They relate to desecration of the Ark – the representation of the very presence of God.

I have taken that statistic from my bible concordance and of course, the number of references to killing will depend on which translation is being used but I think the general picture is clear.

But let's take the question as it stands. I think the key word is *portrayed*. Throughout history and still, of course, today there have been, and are, constant wars, terrible violence, deaths and natural disasters. You can read the Old Testament as one long catalogue of such events and, because God is always involved in the lives of the nation he chose to be specially his, God is associated with what happens to its people and that word *portrayed* carries the connotation that perhaps all is not what it seems at a casual reading and without taking account of the underlying concept of a God who cares. That casual reading of the Old Testament may suggest a God who killed indiscriminately and deliberately and even took pleasure in it.

Not so. We have seen that disobeying a God who is both loving and just carries consequences which are often unpleasant. But this is the same God who, when the time was ripe, allowed his son to be tortured and suffer a horrible death to enable his wayward people to be reconciled to him and, not only forgiven their many misdeeds but to be right there with him in heaven.

A superficial reading of the Old Testament may suggest a degree of uncontrolled chaos and death but, as a chap with the somewhat odd name of Handley C Moule, said: *There is no situation so chaotic that God cannot, from that situation, create something that is surpassingly good. He did it at the creation, He did it at the cross. He is doing it today.*

That is the God not only of the New Testament but of the Old Testament. That, my dear friends, is our God!