

## Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God? Just Trying to Keep in Touch

Reviewed by Lester N. Wright

For Seventh-day Adventists, claiming to believe in the whole Bible requires that at least some attention be paid to the Old Testament. For many this has consisted of a few choice stories, apocalyptic prophecies, and passages cited in the New Testament. For Alden Thompson, a "conservative Christian" who believes that, "Ultimately, whether our experience blossoms or withers depends on the kind of God we serve and the kind of God we find revealed through Scripture," understanding the Old Testament is critical because he maintains that all inspired Scripture is normative.

Thompson urges that we not let our New Testament get in the way of our Old Testament, that we not insist on the New Testament always having the last word in interpretation of the Old. Of course, if we do not study the Old we are not pressed by questions raised there, but neither can we be impressed by the pictures of God found there nor do we have the background required to understand the many allusions in the New. Although there is no question that the revelation of God presented through Christ's incarnation is "better" than anything before—and of anything short of living in the kingdom—by comparison the Old Testament is "good," not "worse."

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Christians usually approach the Old Testament either by the high road of romanticizing the accounts or by the low road of calling attention to the faults of the characters. Thompson contends that "there is much in the Old Testament that offends refined tastes. When we ignore those aspects, we lay the groundwork for the loss of faith. We must take them seriously and show how God can bring about his purposes even out of that kind of situation." From his study has emerged a picture of a God who is not cruel but rather very patiently trying to keep contact with a people far removed from understanding him.

Thompson has made a major study of Old Testament theodicy without the demonic. According to his understanding, to have highlighted the role of a Satan figure, in the cultural milieu of the time, would have led away from the monotheism Yahweh was trying to communicate. Knowledge of the adversary had to come later. In the interim, God had to run the risk of being misunderstood as being responsible for evil, as is often the apparent case in reading the Old Testament.

The Old Testament seems filled with odd laws. It is no wonder that many Christians, in their perceived freedom under grace through the cross, find little of interest there. Thompson acknowledges that "strange people need strange laws." His understanding is based upon the premise of Jesus (as restated by Paul)

that there is only one principle, love. "All other commands are simply commentary."

But God has graciously given many commands as commentary to assist immature humans while we grow to know Him better. "Divine laws are no more enduring than that human situation which makes them necessary."

Thus the decalogue command not to murder was not necessary before people began to murder and will not be necessary in the future.

Further, some activities are wrong only because of the way they would be understood in a particular culture. Stated law has never been God's ideal, but even the strange laws in the Old Testament are good news. They show the patient persistence of God in dealing with non-ideal people.

Finally, Thompson deals with the problems of "prophecies" from the Old Testament that really don't look like prophecies, and with the songs and prayers. He sees inspiration working through the thought patterns of the people being inspired.

Thus the New Testament Christian community used the methodology of their Jewish heritage in reading later events back into earlier narratives. The great truth of many of the Psalms is not the ideas expressed but the fact that they could be expressed. These writers trusted God enough to be able to tell him where it hurt and to expect that if the score needed to be evened, he would do it. Today's Christians are often not nearly as able to express how they really feel, even when talking with God.

Thompson's book presents one person's pilgrimage along the path toward truly accepting *all* inspired scripture as profitable. As such, it is useful to others who may be walking the same, often lonely, road.