

SIX STEPS INTO THE BIBLE : EXTRACT

STEP THREE, 'Pictures of God' begins with a section on the understanding of God in the ancient Near East. Section 2 describes seven biblical pictures of God which have been read in the Preparation for this Step. Section 2 begins:

2. Seven Pictures of God

GOD is unchanging; it is our perception of God that changes over the ages, and, as we saw in the preparation, this changing picture of God is recorded in the OT. It is not a smooth, majestic unfolding of the divine mystery, but more a matter of new insights glimpsed from time to time; a picture redrawn as situations changed and new challenges were addressed. Each new glimpse seems to have come at a time when the history of the Israelites forced upon them the realisation (often painful) that their understanding of Yahweh who had delivered them from bondage in Egypt was not adequate to explain their present experience. The fall of the northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in the eighth century BC, and then the fall of the southern Kingdom of Judah to the Babylonians in the sixth century BC, were two events in particular that prompted new understandings; and the picture changed again with the Return to Jerusalem at the end of the Babylonian Exile.

What is clear is that the monotheism described in the previous section which proclaimed Yahweh to be the only God, was late in developing; it was the high point of Israel's understanding rather than the starting point. 'Early Israel's national religion would have to be described as henotheism or monolatry, that is, belief in and worship focused on one deity but without denying the existence of other gods.'¹ The existence of other gods is clearly implied in the second of the Ten Commandments: 'You must have no other gods besides me' (*Exodus 20.3*), and in this verse from the triumphant Song of Moses after the crossing of the Red Sea:

LORD, who is like you among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
worthy of awe and praise, worker of wonders? *Exodus 15.11*

Similarly, *Psalms 138* begins:

I shall give praise to you, LORD, with my whole heart;
in the presence of the gods I shall sing psalms to you.

¹ John H. Hayes, 'Deity in the Biblical Communities and among their Neighbours', *OxSB*, p. 151.

The seven 'pictures' read in preparation for this Step illustrate how the idea of God developed over the centuries from henotheism to monotheism. They show a remarkable transformation of ideas from God as a tribal champion to God as Lord of all the world, who saves through self-sacrifice, not through violence and war.

The seven pictures explored are: 1. God's conversation with Abraham about Sodom and Gomorrah; 2. the Plagues on Egypt; 3. Elijah and the prophets of Baal; 4. Amos and the Threat from Assyria; 5. the Exile to Babylon; 6. the Suffering Servant; and 7. the Return from Babylon.

Section 3 describes the growth of the messianic expectation, and Section 4 shows how the understanding of the identity of Jesus develops in the NT. The Step concludes:

5. The Christlike God

JESUS is our eighth and final picture of God. He sets the standard by which all the other pictures are to be judged – as Bishop Michael Ramsay said, God is Christlike and in him there is no un-Christlikeness at all.² Jesus taught about God in various ways which I explore in the next three Steps: his teaching about the Kingdom in Step Four; about righteousness in Step Five, and about hope and destiny in Step Six; but it is in what he *did* more than in what he said that the Christlike picture of God is disclosed.

Jesus offered a new view of God, a God of love, not wrath. We should think of God as a loving father, he said, and address him as *Abba*, the name children used to address their father. And we are to approach him expectantly: 'Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, those who seek find, and to those who knock, the door will be opened.' (*Matthew 7.7–8*) He pictured God as so close to us that he had counted the number of hairs on our heads! (*Luke 12.7*)

Jesus demonstrated the love of God in his miracles, in his outreach to sinners and those regarded as socially unacceptable, and in his acts of forgiveness. So, for example, the woman with the issue of blood was restored to wholeness, and Jairus' daughter restored to life (*Mark 5.21–43*); Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector, was able to rehabilitate himself (*Luke 19.1–10*); the woman taken in adultery was saved from stoning by the self-righteous, and forgiven (*John 8.1–11*). Above all Jesus showed the love of God in the laying down his life in sacrifice.

² Michael Ramsay, *God, Christ and the World*, pp. 37 & 41.

Jesus rejected the crude explanation that suffering was the penalty for sin. When the Tower of Siloam collapsed killing eighteen people, he said: 'Do you imagine they must have been more guilty than all the other people living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you...' (*Luke 13.4–5*). Nor did he have any truck with the God of Wrath. When James and John proposed to bring down fire, Elijah style, on a Samaritan town that would not receive Jesus, he rebuked them (*Luke 9.51–56*). And in contrast to ideas of religious exclusivity (as in the picture from Ezra), he echoed Third Isaiah declaring the Temple to be a house of prayer for all nations (*Mark 11.17*).

The new picture Jesus offered was of God as love. Jesus *was* that picture. One of the most remarkable examples was the healing in a synagogue of a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years.

READ Luke 13.10–17.

The story is dramatic. Jesus notices the woman bent double, unable to stand up straight. He calls her forward and says to her, 'You are rid of your trouble.' He lays his hands on her; immediately she straightens up. Imagine the gasps of amazement! This violation of the sabbath laws is too much for the president of the synagogue, but Jesus will have none of it, and condemns the president's hypocrisy: 'Is there a single one of you who does not loose his ox or his donkey from its stall and take it out to water on the sabbath? And here is this woman, a daughter of Abraham, who has been bound by Satan for eighteen long years: was it not right for her to be loosed from her bonds on the sabbath?' Look around as you imagine the scene. The president isn't the only one feeling angry at this rebuke.

I had not appreciated the full significance of this miracle until I read Walter Wink's commentary in *Engaging the Powers*.³ He describes no less than six reversals of accepted values of the day:

1. Jesus refers to the woman as a 'daughter of Abraham,' an expression not found in all of ancient Jewish literature. Women were saved through their men; to call her a 'daughter of Abraham' was to make her a full-fledged member of the covenant and of equal standing before God with men.
2. To heal her on a sabbath was to liberate the sabbath to be a jubilee of release and restoration.
3. To touch her was to revoke the holiness code with its male scruples about menstrual uncleanness and sexual advances.

³ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 129.

4. To speak to her in public was to jettison male restraints on women's freedom, restraints born of sexual possessiveness and the caricature of women as seducers.
5. To place her in the midst of the synagogue was to challenge the male monopoly on the means of grace and access to God.
6. To assert that her illness was not divine punishment for sin, but satanic oppression, was to declare war on the entire system of domination, whose driving spirit is satan.

Believing that God would have disclosed to his prophets the truth about Jesus, the first Christians alighted on the prophecies of Isaiah, particularly Isaiah of Babylon, and the NT revelation of God continues from his insights. Picturing God through the light of the Resurrection, the centuries since the Exile fell away; the violent, exclusive and judgemental pictures were discarded; God is proclaimed as the God of Love. John the Elder speaks for the early Church:

We have seen for ourselves, and we are witnesses, that the Father has sent the Son to be the saviour of the world ... Thus we have come to know and believe in the love which God has for us. *God is love*; he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him.

1 John 4.14–17 (italics added)

Perhaps the most beautiful testimony to the God of Love is Paul's Hymn to Love in *1 Corinthians 13*. Read it substituting the word 'God' for 'love', and the message is plain:

God keeps no score of wrongs, takes no pleasure in the sins of others, but delights in the truth. There is nothing God cannot face; there is no limit to his faith, his hope, his endurance. God abides for ever.

Had God changed, as some have said? I find that hard to believe. Can it really be that the One, Eternal God, the source and origin of all that is, had a change of heart, turning away from the ways of wrath to the way of love? I don't think so. As T. S. Eliot said in his poem *Burnt Norton*, God is unchanging; he is and always has been 'the still point of the turning world ... where past and future are gathered.' It is not God who has changed, but our perception of God. As it says in *Hebrews*, in times past God spoke 'in many and varied ways through the prophets. But in this the final age he has spoken to us in his Son' (*Hebrews 1.1*). As we have seen, the prophetic view unfolded in a series of changing perceptions. Jesus did not announce that God

had changed; rather he was the final step in an unfolding revelation; he made explicit what was implicit in the vision of Isaiah of Babylon, the high point of the OT conception.

An important conclusion follows: if God is unchanging and in him there is no un-Christlikeness, he has always been the God of love and the God of all peoples. God has never been a tribal champion; his ways have never been those of violence, as in the Exodus or on Mount Carmel; the purpose of his judgement has never been to punish, as in the Exile, but to bring about repentance (*cf. John 3.17*); he has never required racial purity, as in the Return. His self-disclosure in Jesus shows these ideas to be misconceptions, and we must either look for other explanations of the events out of which they arose, or seek their truth at a level deeper than the literal. I consider how we might do this in the Endnote, *Meaning in Old Pictures* (page 226).

According to John, Jesus said to the Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well, 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.' (*John 4.24*) 'God is love'; 'God is spirit', two simple statements that sum up the Christlike picture of God, transcending all the anthropomorphic, wrathful pictures. They take us back to *Genesis* and the picture of the Spirit of God hovering over the primal waters. Six centuries after the Deuteronomic editors produced their magisterial account of the God who is the author of all that exists, Paul expressed the same truth in a single, lapidary phrase. Addressing the Court of the Areopagus in Athens he spoke of the God 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (*Acts 17.28*). This is the eternal God of whom Jesus is the human face, the final and definitive picture.