Images of God

Teacher Background

*Images of God in the Old Testament*

What do you immediately think of when someone mentions the "Old Testament God"? Probably a stern God, very concerned with people keeping the divine rules; a God characterised by thunder and lightning on Mt. Sinai. Perhaps you remember the God who turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for looking back at Sodom and Gomorrah, or the God who told Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac and then stopped Abraham in the nick of time.

But what about the God who walked in the Garden of Eden during the cool of the evening (Genesis 3), the God who compares the nation Israel to an adulterous wife whom God still loves passionately (Hosea 2—3) or—reversing the gender imagery—the God who has more tenderness toward Israel than a mother has “for the child of her womb” (Isaiah 49:15)? What about the merciful God whom the prophet Jonah criticised after the people of Nineveh converted, much to Jonah’s surprise and disgust? What about the God who wants to share the divine wisdom with every man, woman and child willing to prize that wisdom more than silver and gold (Wisdom 7)?

Many Christians are so unfamiliar with the Old Testament that they readily believe that all its images of God are stern and legalistic. The truth, however, is more complicated. All the inspired writers wrote about the same God, but not all of them had the same images of God. Just as children can grow toward more truthful images about their parents, so Christians grow toward more adult images of God. Why accept from the Old Testament only the stern images and discard all the others?

*Images of God and Jesus in the New Testament*

Christians often have the opposite problem with images of God and Jesus in the New Testament. We can fondly remember the parables of the Good Shepherd (John 10) or the Loving Father/Lost Son (Luke 15), while forgetting that Jesus' parable about the Last Judgment (Matthew 25) presents us with the tough challenge to serve Christ in the needs of our brothers and sisters.

Christians need to remember Jesus' story about the Pharisee praying in the Temple ("O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity...") while the tax collector at the back simply struck his breast and said "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18). Jesus' description of the Pharisee is as stern and uncompromising as his view of the tax collector is compassionate. The common image of a loving and generous New Testament God should not erase the need for ongoing conversion to the Lord’s ways. God is neither an ogre in the Hebrew Scriptures nor an indulgent grandfather in the New Testament. The Bible contains varied images of God because God inspired diverse images.