

## Should Christians Ignore the Old Testament?

### Does Avoiding the Old Testament Solve the Problems of Christians Explaining God's “Ungodly” Behavior?

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It is... unwise to declare that the wrath of God or the love of God is any more or less obvious in the Old Testament than in the New. Despite popular opinion, the primary characteristic of God in the Old Testament is love. His love is intense and unremitting, His love is forever.<sup>1</sup>

Many Christians are taught to avoid the Old Testament. The reasons for ignoring the largest portion of our Bibles both vary and intersect. We are told that “we are no longer under the Old Testament law,” “it is not for the Christian dispensation,” “only the New Testament is applicable to the Christian,” “God worked in wrath under the Old but has grace and mercy under the New,” “it is too difficult to understand,” “Jesus changed everything” and a variety of other reasons.

Some of this avoidance is not limited to the books in the section of our Bibles dividing the Old from the New. Some will minimize the importance of the four gospels (and some extreme dispensationalists will include the book of Acts in this list as well). We are told that the gospels are irrelevant because Jesus had not died and resurrected, thus bringing in the dispensation of grace.

This issue is not something unique to our generation but has been debated almost near the time the New Testament had been completed.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, people have a difficult time loving and worshipping God as the Old Testament supposedly depicts Him. Rather than making use of the tools provided to us to resolve the issues about the [alleged] Old Testament picture of God, many would prefer to simply dismiss it altogether.

Why concern ourselves with Old Testament statements about God cursing people, smiting the disobedient Israelites, inflicting sickness, bringing natural disasters, deceiving and sending lying spirits, hardening hearts and then punishing the one hardened, and the numerous other horrific acts attributed to Him when we can just acknowledge its lack of importance for the Christian? We'll just keep it around if we need some divine poetry and some fun stories for Sunday (or Sabbath) school.

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<sup>1</sup> Olbricht, Thomas H. **He Loves Forever: The Enduring Message of God from the Old Testament** (Joplin, MS: College Press Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 10, 11

<sup>2</sup> Kaiser Jr., Walter C. **Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament** (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publishers, 2015). On pp. 9-11 Old Testament scholar Walter C. Kaiser Jr. gives a brief but very interesting account of how the Old Testament was first divided from the New and a number of scholars in history have attempted to dismiss it as an authority for the Christian's life and walk.

However, do we truly and sincerely believe that if we divorce the Old Testament from the Bible that this will resolve some of those embarrassing difficulties we have been led to believe only occur in the Old Testament?

### **The Old Testament is Inspired by God**

If we are going to issue the Old Testament a certificate of divorce we probably need to check with its primary author first. You see, Paul tells us that this document is “God-breathed:”

*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16)*

The word “inspired” in the passage above means “God-breathed”. Some believe that it is an allusion to when God breathed into Adam’s nostrils and he received the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). God is the one who formed and gave life to the Scriptures. Note that Paul said that He did this with *all* Scripture. This would have to include the Old Testament writings since they are called Scripture: “*And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself*” (Luke 24:27).

It was the Holy Spirit who moved upon men to record the Word of God (1 Pet. 1:20-21). While scholars continue to debate the type of inspiration the Holy Spirit had over the Bible writers (whether it was *mechanical*, *plenary*, etc.), the fact is, God personally gave us the Bible (the Scriptures) and refers to it as His Word: “*If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken*” (John 10:35). The “Word of God” and “the Scripture” are synonymous terms. Shouldn’t the author of the book have a say in what part of His book should be dissected from the rest?

It is also important to note that Paul stated that all Scripture is *profitable*. That means that everything from Moses to the prophets has some benefit for the Christian today. Paul tells us that the Old Testament was written to us to allow its teachings and historical events to assist us in our walk of faith (Rom. 4:16-23; 1 Cor. 10:1-11). Perhaps it is not the wisest thing to rip the OT from our Bibles after all.

### **God Sending Delusions**

From the above we must conclude that giving the Old Testament (or any other portion of Scripture) a place of irrelevance is an insult to God since this is His Word. But even more, to do so would never resolve any of the embarrassing difficulties anyway. Let’s look at an example:

*And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the LORD have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel (Eze. 14:9)*

Here the Old Testament clearly depicts God as a deceiver. Even worse, God threatens to destroy the prophet He deceived. Not a very loving picture of God now is it? The simple solution for many is, “Well, that’s the Old Testament. I am a New Testament Christian. I am a disciple Jesus, not a disciple of Ezekiel. So I am only concerned about the New Testament.” That might appear to resolve the issue and ease the mind until one runs across this little gem right there in their New Testament:

*And for this cause **God shall send them strong delusion**, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thess. 2:11-12)*

As we can see, the New Testament doesn’t exactly let God off of the hook here. Hence, chopping the Old Testament from the Bible is not the “great escape” that some make it out to be. Thankfully there are better ways to deal with these issues in both testaments. The good news is that the issue of God being a deceiver is not unresolvable. But trying to down-grade the Old Testament’s level of importance is *not* one of the solutions.

The best way to resolve this is to remember that *there is a permissive idiom in the Hebrew language*. Concerning Ezekiel 14:9 the late Wesleyan scholar, Adam Clarke, wrote, “I have often had occasion to remark that **it is common in the Hebrew language to state a thing as done by the Lord which he only suffers or permits to be done.**”<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis is mine)

When we interpret Scripture with Scripture we will see that this permissive idiom is true. While God often gave His Word using the language, customs, and idioms of the Israelites, He gave plenty of information in other parts to help the Western mind understand what is actually being said.

Often we can find explanations for the *causative* language in the context of the passage itself or from other passages. For example, God tells Jeremiah that He *did not* send those prophets that deceive (Jer. 14:15; 23:32; 29:8-9). Actually, God restrains these lying spirits but when people persist in wanting deception then God, at some point, allows them to have what they want (Isaiah 30:9-10). When God releases His restraints then *He takes responsibility for the results* even if He is not the direct cause of them.

This truth is made even clearer in 2 Thessalonians. In the context we see that God is only said to “send delusion” because He is no longer holding back the deceiver (2 Thess. 2:6-9). Satan is the one who deceives the whole world (Rev. 12:9) and God allows him to have his way. In that sense God is said to *send* delusion.

### **God Hardening Hearts**

Another example we find in Scripture is how, upon a careless (or theologically biased) reading of the Old Testament, God hardens people’s hearts and then punishes them for doing that which the hardening made them do:

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<sup>3</sup> Adam Clarke’s Bible Commentary

*And the LORD said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: **but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go.** And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn: And I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and **if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn** (Exodus 4:21-23)*

Now tell me that this isn't unfair. Seriously, God uses divine power to harden Pharaoh's heart which causes Pharaoh not to let the people go and God in turn punishes Pharaoh by killing his son for acting on that hardening. It is difficult to defend this language so the easy escape for numerous Christians is to claim that this was under the law (for many dispensationalists, anything in the Old Testament is supposedly under the law, even if the incident happened *before* the law of Moses came into effect).

Since, as they believe, our focus is only on the New Testament because of the finished work of Christ, then there is no need to concern ourselves with God hardening people's hearts. It's all OT stuff. Yet, those who go through that escape hatch might crawl to a dead end since the New Testament makes an even stronger statement about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart:

*For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and **whom he will he hardeneth** (Rom. 9:17-18)*

As we can see, the New Testament, using an example from the Old, employs the exact same language. Therefore, cutting the Old Testament from the Bible is like the ostrich that hides its head in the sand thinking that it has escaped danger. The danger is still there. Both testaments claim that God personally hardens hearts and then punishes the one "divinely" hardened. Again, the only resolution for this that vindicates God's character is found,

...in the Scripture idiom, God is often said to do what he only permits, or does not interpose to prevent. The means by which Pharaoh's heart was hardened, were God's withdrawing the plagues one after another, when Moses, at the king's entreaty, interceded for the nation.<sup>4</sup>

If we truly read our Bibles carefully, we will see this "permission" concerning Pharaoh taught very clearly. Going back to Exodus 4:21 we read, "*And **the LORD said unto Moses ....but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go.***" When we compare this to other

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<sup>4</sup> Ritchie, David **Lectures, Explanatory and Practical, on the Doctrinal part of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans** (Edinburgh: Neill and Co. Printers, 1831), pp. 209, 210

Scripture we can see that God was only predicting Pharaoh's response to the Lord's chastisement.

God told Isaiah to "*Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes.*" God did not give Isaiah divine power to make people's hearts hard. God simply told Isaiah the results that would occur from his prophesying over the people (Isa. 6:8-10). This same truth is taught in other passages (Jer. 1:9-10; Eze. 32:17-18). This exact same truth applies to God's statement concerning Pharaoh:

*But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, **he hardened his heart, and hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said** ....Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, **This is the finger of God: and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not unto them; as the LORD had said** (Ex. 8:15, 19; see also 7:13-14)*

In Exodus 4:21 God only *predicted* how Pharaoh would react to Moses demands to let God's people go free. However, since God Himself foretold the event He took responsibility for its coming about. Therefore God does not *literally* harden hearts. Yet, one cannot come to this conclusion by ignoring the Old Testament since the New Testament makes the same claim. The only way to resolve it is remember the permissive idiomatic language of the Hebrews.

### **An Angel of the Lord Inflicting Disease**

In one final example, we have a case where the angel of the Lord is said to inflict disease on Israel as a punishment for David's sin of numbering the people of Israel:

*So the LORD sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed: and there died of the people from Dan even to Beersheba seventy thousand men. And when the angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, **It is enough: stay now thine hand.** And the angel of the LORD was by the threshingplace of Araunah the Jebusite. (2 Sam. 24:15-16)*

This is a very difficult one for us Word-Faith people. What do we do when someone tells us that God sent sickness and He used one of His very own angels to do it? Certainly we can say, "Ah, that was just Old Testament. We don't live under the Old Covenant of law and works. God doesn't do that kind of stuff anymore." As with the previous examples, one will find that this is not as simple a maneuver as one might be led to believe:

*And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, **It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.** And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him,*

*because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost (Acts 12:21-23)*

Once again we find that there is no hiding behind, “I am a ‘New Testament only’ Christian” since the New Testament appears to present God as an inflictor of sickness. The best resolution is once again found in knowledge of the Hebrew permissive idiom in which God is said to do that which He merely permitted. Concerning the angel that allegedly inflicted sickness on Israel one writer notes:

When they make God the author of the pestilence, it is clear they do not mean to say he is the immediate cause in so fearful a calamity, from the fact that in other places they represent God as the author of moral evil, where they certainly do not mean to say he is the immediate author of such evil. In a somewhat recent period of their history it cannot be denied that, instead of making God the author of evil, they attribute it to a malignant spirit of high origin—viz., Satan; but still they were aware of the origin of this being, that he was the creature of God, and acted beneath his superintendence. The difficulty, then, in regard to their representations arises from this source. God, in a certain sense, is the author of all things. This is true. But the ancient Hebrews do not appear to have distinguished with sufficient accuracy that liberty or permission which is given us, in the course of Divine providence, to do or not to do, to do good or evil, from the direct and immediate agency of God himself.<sup>5</sup>

The truth that this writer expresses is seen in Rev. 7 where the angels are commanded not to *hurt the earth*:

*And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying, **Hurt not the earth**, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads (Rev. 7:1-3)*

Note that the angels were holding back the winds of destruction. They were told by a commanding angel “not to hurt the earth” until a certain task had been accomplished. Hence, the only way for the angels to “hurt the earth” is to *release* the winds of destruction that they held back from destroying it. *It is by removing their protection that they hurt the earth.*

This is the exact same way that the angel of the Lord can be said to bring pestilence to Israel and to strike Herod with worm disease. In Psalm 91:1-12 the angels protect people from numerous things to include pestilence. God and His angels are only said to be the cause of sickness and disease in the sense that they leave the sick ones unprotected. Herod’s and David’s sins caused the angel to remove his protection over them.

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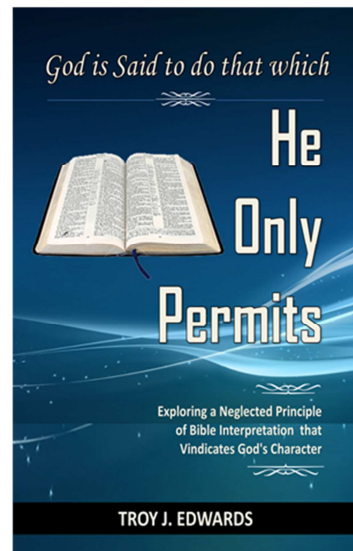
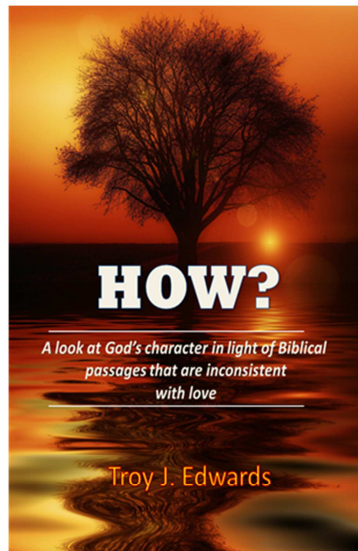
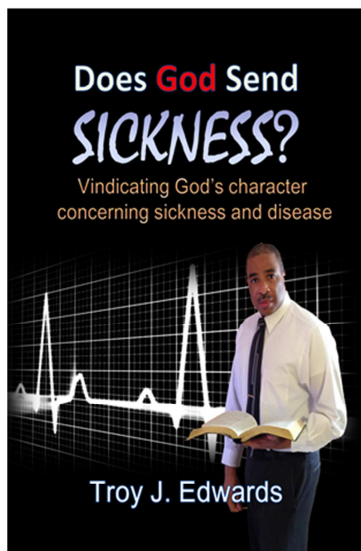
<sup>5</sup> Jahn, John, DD **Biblical Antiquities** (London: Thomas Ward and Co., 1835), p. 89

## Conclusion

Attempting to teach a loving and kind God by doing away with the Old Testament or relegating it to an insignificant and unimportant attachment to our New Testament Bible will never work since many of the same issues in the Old Testament are in the New. From the Biblical examples given above, we can see that there is no way to vindicate God's character apart from recognizing the idiomatic expressions inherent within the Hebrew language and culture in which God is said to do that which He merely allows or permits.

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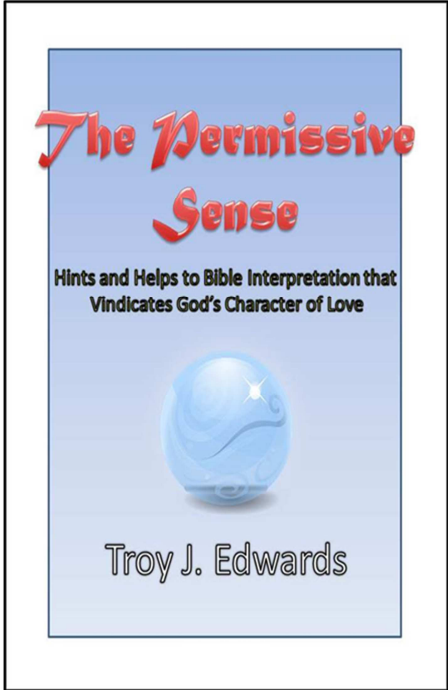
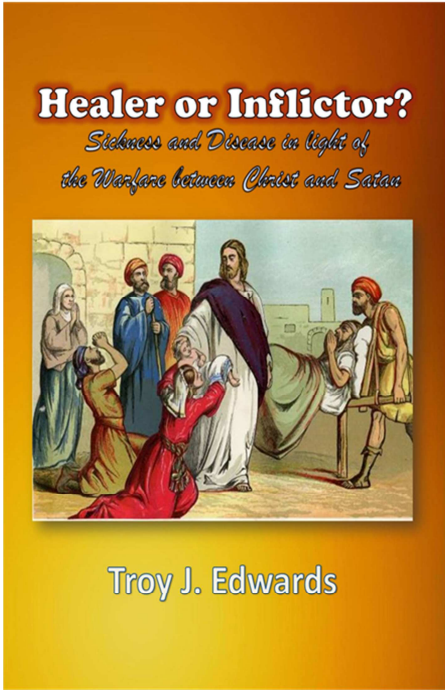


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