

# SCHOLAR'S CORNER

**I like to read the New Testament, but I don't like to read the Old Testament because God seems jealous and vengeful, always punishing people for their sins. But in the New Testament, God is loving and forgiving. I know they are supposed to be the same God, but I can't get over my impression that they are very different.**

First, let me say I know what you are referring to in the Old Testament. There is the story in Numbers of Korah being swallowed by the earth for leading a rebellion against Moses. And on a larger scale, the Assyrians conquer the Northern Kingdom, and later the Babylonians conquer the Southern Kingdom, incidents explained as divine punishments for idolatry.

But Christians often overlook that divine punishment can be found in the New Testament too. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead for lying to the Apostles. And on a much larger scale, a third of humanity is wiped out in Revelations.

There is a lot of mercy and grace,

forgiveness and restoration in the Old Testament. It's not all doom and gloom. Sternness and kindness, judgment and mercy are to be found in both Testaments.

Christianity insists that we "retain the paradox" involved here. Much as Christianity "maintains the paradox" of Jesus' identity by saying he is fully human and fully divine, so Christianity holds that God is holy and just and punishes wickedness and, at the same time, is forgiving and loving and approachable. Christianity says both are true, and we shouldn't try to "resolve the paradox."

Rabbinic Judaism says the same thing. The Talmud speaks of God's

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judgment. In verses assuring Israel of God's love or promising future restoration, we see God's attribute of mercy. We need to keep God's two hands together, as it were, and not deny one or the other.

Both Judaism and Christianity say we need to "maintain the paradox" between God as transcendent (high and far above us and infinitely holy and

"attribute of judgment" but also of God's "attribute of mercy." They are like the left and right hands of God. In verses excoriating the people for their sins or threatening punishment if they do not repent, we see the attribute of

awesome) and God as immanent (close, present and accessible, welcoming and enfolding us). The "Divine Paradox" is succinctly stated in Exodus 34:6-7: "The Lord, the Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

Uncomfortable as those words may make us, they express the contradictory or paradoxical biblical picture of God that is part of our heritage.

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