



homily on exodus 20.²⁻⁶

Unwavering devotion for thousands of generations

¹Then ²YHWH spoke all these words.

²"I am YHWH your God: He who brought You out of the land of Miṣrayim, out of the house of slaves.

³You are not to have gods other than Me.

⁴You are not to make yourselves an image: not the likeness of anything in the sky above or on the land below, or in the waters below land. ⁵You are not to worship them or serve them because I, YHWH, Your God, am a jealous God, who lays the guilt of fathers upon children up to the third or fourth generation of those who show enmity for Me, ⁶while acting with unwavering devotion toward thousands of generations of those who love Me and observe My directives (author's translation).

Introduction

The God of the Hebrew Bible can come across as brutal, vengeful, and violent. No matter the author or editor of the Hebrew Bible—the Yahwist, the Deuteronomist, Isaiah, Ezekiel, the Psalmists, etc.—violent acts are attributed to God and God's will. Some of them are horrendous.¹ Others are ridiculous.² I reject any claim that God acted in a violence manner or that he inspired any form of human violence.

I confess that Jesus of Nazareth is the most significant reason for my rejecting claims of divine violence. It is difficult, if not impossible to reconcile the God of the Hebrew Bible with that of the New Testament. Jesus, as the perfect manifestation and reflection of God, is difficult to reconcile with Yahweh. The tension between the texts has produced all manner of debate and proffered multiple solutions. I do not deny or minimize this tension. Still, there

¹ Consider, for example, 2 Samuel 21.¹⁻⁹ or the claim that God commanded the genocide of Joshua.

² Consider, for example, 2 Kings 2.²³⁻²⁴, or the idea of God committing world-wide genocide through a universal flood.

are moments of clarity found in the Hebrew Bible that are consistent with what we learn of God in Christ.

In this meditation, I would like to use Exodus 20.²⁻⁶ as an example of a moment of clarity concerning the nature of God and as a jumping off point to briefly explore God and His character as understood, albeit, inconsistently, in the Hebrew Bible.

Generational repercussions of idolatry

Obviously, this text comes from what has come to be known as the “Ten Commandments”—also as the “Ten Sayings,” and “The Decalogue.” The Decalogue represents a kind of creation formula. Just as God created the world through ten utterances,³ Israel comes into being as a covenant community through the ten directives found in Exodus 1.¹⁻¹⁷.

This second directive is accompanied with potential repercussions or consequences for breach of the directive. God “lays the guilt of fathers upon children up to the third or fourth generation of those who show enmity for Me.” God does not, however, specify the exact nature of the generational repercussions for idolatry. That said, Exodus 20.⁶ mentions the generational blessing that comes as a result of one party’s rejection of idolatry. That blessing is God’s promise of “unwavering devotion.”⁴ So, we could conclude, not unreasonably, that the generational repercussion of idolatry is the *absence* of a promise of God’s “unwavering devotion.”

Perhaps it was this statement about the multi-generational impact of idolatry that brought about sayings such as that found in Ezekiel: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”⁵ Ezekiel went on to challenge the idea that anyone was punished for another’s sins.

³ Each of these begins with Hebrew, *wayyō`mer*: Genesis 1.³⁻⁵, 1.⁶⁻⁸, 1.⁹⁻¹⁰, 1.¹¹⁻¹³, 1.¹⁴⁻¹⁹, 1.²⁰⁻²³, 1.²⁴⁻²⁵, 1.²⁶⁻²⁷, 1.²⁸, 1.²⁹⁻².³ The number 7 can serve as a marker of completion. Hence, the seven days of creation. However, the number 10, can also serve as a marker of completion. So, in the creation account of Genesis 1.¹⁻².³, the final version uses both markers for completion for emphasis.

⁴ Hebrew, *hesed*.

⁵ Ezekiel 18.²

“The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son...”⁶

This is, perhaps, a reminder that the Hebrew Bible—and all scripture, for that matter—is not monolithic. Among its many editors and authors there is a diversity of thought. Indeed, even individual authors and editors can be inconsistent and, at times, conflicted. Only Jesus, it seems, is utterly and perfectly one.

Whatever their nature, the threatened potential generational repercussions of idolatry can cause consternation and seem unfair to many readers. It doesn't seem right to punish individuals for some wrong another committed. Nor, for that matter, does it really seem right to bless individuals for something another did right. I cannot say that I do not share in the uncertainty. I have considered a number of possible explanations that seem to dampen the consternation, but these are not entirely satisfactory. I will not explore these in this meditation. Rather, I would like to explore another aspect of God's saying:

“...who lays the guilt of fathers upon children up to the third or fourth generation of those who show enmity for Me, while acting with unwavering devotion toward thousands of generations of those who love Me and observe My directives.”

Let's consider the generations that follow the idolater and the non-idolater. Many generations of descendants are likely to follow both. But, for illustration purposes, let's say that the Lord promised unwavering devotion to only 1,000 generations (rather than many thousands of generations) that followed one party's love and service to God as reflected in the rejection and absence of idolatry. Then, let's consider that 3 or 4 generations have no promise of God's unwavering devotion because of a previous party's idolatry. Where does that leave the idolater's other 996 or 997 generations?

It seems that they can expect the same promise of unwavering devotion as the full 1,000

⁶ Ezekiel 18.²⁰

generations that follow the one who avoids idolatry. So, between the thousand generations that come after an individual resistant to idolatry and the thousand generations that come after the idolater, that's 1,996 or 1,997 out of 2,000 generations that enjoy God's unwavering devotion. That's 99.8% that enjoy God's unwavering devotion. That's a pretty good batting average. If we consider that God speaks in terms of many thousands of generations rather than just one thousand, the percentage of those who experience the promise of God's unwavering devotion comes as close to 100% as is possible"—like, 99.9999999999....%.

Now, of course, I am being somewhat tongue in cheek. God did not expect, it seems to me, that we take his statement so mathematically or literally. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that God is saying something profound about the expansiveness of his generosity. Whatever consequences flow from idolatry—or any sin, for that matter—are short lived. They last the blink of an eye. God's unwavering devotion is, essentially, boundless and certainly out of proportion to what might be “deserved.”

This, it seems to me, is the point of Exodus 20.⁵⁻⁶. If we are to get hung up on anything, it should be the expansiveness of God's unwavering devotion rather than unstipulated repercussions that last but a moment. We will come back to this later.

How many generations was that?

Notwithstanding the Hebrew Bible's portrayal of an angry and violent God, Israel's own ancient history can be seen to reflect the same point concerning God's generosity and mercy as that found in Exodus 20.⁵⁻⁶. In the Hebrew Bible's historical books written and edited by the Deuteronomists—Joshua through Kings—Israel, whether the northern or the southern kingdom, is reported to have been in near constant rebellion against God. This rebellion caused God continual consternation until, finally, having had enough, He allowed—or as many would have it, “caused”—Israel and Judah to go into exile.

Israel's continual rebellion is nowhere better described than in the Book of Jeremiah—its author often credited with being foundation to the Deuteronomic reform and worldview.

“From the day that your ancestors left Miṣrayim [Egypt] right up to the present, I have sent to you all my servants, the prophets. Daily. Starting early. Sending them out. But they [your ancestors] did not give heed, or even give a listening ear, but resisted. They were worse than their ancestors.”⁷

“Certainly, Yiśrā’ēl’s people and Y^ehûdâ’s people have, in full view of Me, only acted badly from their youth, so that they have truly provoked Me with their idols. This utterance is YHWH’s.”⁸

“Does an engaged young lady disregard her adornments?
Does a bride ignore her commitments?
Yet, my people have disregarded Me
days without number.”⁹

So, right from the get-go, say 1250 BC., before Israel had even entered their “promised land,” the people misbehaved, turned to idols, distrusted and ignored God—and that, even worse than their ancestors had! Indeed, the 8th century prophet, Amos, charged that Israel was no better than the nations that surrounded them.¹⁰

Judah’s citizens, Jeremiah lamented, never saw a tree but what they lusted to prostitute themselves under it.¹¹ The best of Israel’s citizenry, Micah complained in the 8th century, was “as a brier; the most upright... sharper than a thorn hedge.”¹² Even Judah’s national capital, Jerusalem, was a continual source of irritation.

“Truly this city has been a source of intense anger for Me from the day they built it right

⁷ Jeremiah 7.²⁵⁻²⁶, author’s translation

⁸ Jeremiah 32.³⁰, author’s translation. See also Jeremiah 3.²⁵ and 22.²¹.

⁹ Jeremiah 2.³², author’s translation

¹⁰ See Amos 6.² and 9.⁷

¹¹ See Jeremiah 2.²⁰

¹² Micah 7.⁴, author’s translation

up to the present day, when I am removing it from My sight.”¹³

We could go on for pages. The point, here, is that the Deuteronomist and the Hebrew prophets were not shy about discussing and criticizing the rebellious nature of Israel. We cannot question the Hebrew Bible’s depiction of Israel’s character. Israel’s apostasy was perpetual and enduring.¹⁴

At the same time, we should not ignore that even in the Hebrew Bible’s reporting of Israel’s perpetual apostasy, it, almost unwittingly, witnesses to God’s near boundless patience and generosity. Yes, the Deuteronomistic school of thought saw God as being responsible for personally turning the levers of international power so as to bring about exile. God’s response seems extremely violent and intense. The text can make it so that we think of God and anger, almost, as synonymous.

But—and this is a big BUT—the exile came after hundreds of years—generations— of stubborn recalcitrance on the part of Israel, and after clear and consistent admonitions and warnings on the part of God. The 13th century. The 12th century. The 11th century. The 10th century. The 9th century. The 8th century. The 7th century. Right on into the 6th century. Century after century God had been patient with a nation that turned its back on Him and prostituted itself with false gods—idolatrous lovers—under every tree it laid eyes on. This is remarkable patience, even if it might not quite seem up to the level of Jesus’ patience. That’s a lot of undeserving generations that experienced God’s unwavering devotion between circa 1250 BC and 586/7 BC!

And here’s another BUT. The “harsh treatment” of exile that Israel/ Judah faced, like the repercussions that the 3 or 4 generations suffered after the unfaithfulness of an avowed idolater, lasted but a very brief moment, after which God went right back to His habit of generational unwavering devotion.

¹³ Jeremiah 32.³¹, author’s translation

¹⁴ See Jeremiah 8.⁵

“For a very brief moment I left you,
but with tremendous compassion I will draw you to Me.
In an outburst of anger, I briefly hid myself from you,
but with unending and unwavering devotion, I will have compassion on you.
So says Your Redeemer, YHWH.
To Me, this is like the waters of Nōaḥ,
when I promised to keep the waters of Nōaḥ from ever again covering the earth.
So have I promised to refrain from being angry with you,
or from rebuking you.
Though mountains might disappear,
and hills become unsteady,
My unwavering devotion will never leave you,
nor the pledge of My goodwill ever waver.
So says YHWH, the one who has compassion on you.”¹⁵

Now, yes, one could object, I suppose, “A lot of good the short duration of exile did for those who actually experienced the brutal reality of it.” True. Yet, ancient societies, including that of Israel, were not attuned to “the one,” the individual, as we are today. Even though Jesus was perfectly attuned to the importance, the needs, the worth of “the one,” it would not be until the enlightenment, a millennium and a half after Jesus, that societies, including “Christian” societies would discover the importance and value of “the one,” the worth of the individual soul. But that’s a subject for another day.

There can be little doubt that God’s unwavering devotion to one rebellious generation after another—thousands of them—and then His as-fast-as-possible reversal of exile and abandonment was viewed by ancient Israel as magnanimous beyond comprehension. It still should be so viewed.

¹⁵ Isaiah 54.⁷⁻¹⁰, author’s translation

The God of the Hebrew Bible can seem brutal. Violent. Intimidating. I do not deny this, though, of course, I would argue that it was the creation of a god after the human heart that the text often presents, rather than the one true and living God. Yes, Yahweh is often made into the substance of an idol by many a Hebrew author/ editor. The Hebrew Bible stands as a stark warning to all of us about the dangers of fashioning God in our image rather than doing, through and with God's grace, the hard work of fashioning ourselves after the image of God.

Given how much of the Hebrew Bible was written/edited during and after the exile, we should perhaps not be surprised by its wrathful and vengeful God. Perhaps we could show a bit more charity to the Book's authors and editors. It is difficult to imagine the psychic shock that the exile was to Israel and then Judah. In light of the exile and its psychic shock, and in light of the survivors' false attribution of the exile to the direct actions of God, it is easy to see how God came to be viewed as so vindictive.

And yet, this false portrayal of God is, in a sense, contradicted by the very narrative that the authors and editors created. From the moment God met Israel—both the man and the nation that bore his name—he and they did little by way of honoring and loving God. One generation after another, century after century rebelled against Him—not that they are so very different than us!

But God continued to labor for and with and in behalf of His habitually rebellious nation. Century after century, generation after generation remained in a land that they had polluted as they remained the beneficiaries of His unwavering devotion. Even the testimony of the strict Deuteronomists, so traumatized by the exile, cannot hide the reality of God's love and unwavering devotion. When exile did finally come, it was as short as God could possibly make it. Even in a record that often seems to focus on a violent and vengeful god, the patience and mercy and unwavering devotion that God felt for His people shines through like a light in darkness.

Israel's history with God, then, was consistent with what God had said about Himself as He began to bring the nation into covenant with Him through His Ten Words. When the math of Exodus 20.⁵⁻⁶ is finally calculated, little is more consistent and dependable than God's unwavering devotion. It extends to and dominates, essentially, 100% of all humankind. We can wonder at, question, and even chaff at its saying about the three or four generations who labor under the guilt of their forebearers in some unspecified way. But, it seems to me, we ought to even more wonder at and ponder upon the unwavering devotion that God extends to thousands upon thousands of generations that were and are, likely little better than any other.

In examining both Exodus 20.³⁻⁵ with its wondrous math and Israel's history with God, we have only scratched the surface of the Hebrew Bible's testimony of God's unwavering devotion to Israel and to humankind. And, indeed, we can never do more than scratch the surface of a divine love that is, as the apostle Paul testified, without "breadth, and length, and depth, and height."¹⁶

Still, even the imperfect witness of the Hebrew Bible is enough to take one's breath away.

"He is the One who pardons all your guilt.

He is the One who heals all your infirmities.

He is the One who delivers you from Hell's pit.

He is the One who surrounds you with unwavering devotion and compassion;

He is the One who fulfills your desires for good.

Your youthfulness is restored as a soaring eagle.

Devoted and generous is YHWH;

slow to become angry and abounding in fidelity.

He is not always condemning.

He is not always annoyed.

¹⁶ See Ephesians 3.¹⁸

He does not relate to us as our sins deserve
or deal with us as our iniquities might suggest.”¹⁷

With God’s unwavering devotion being so encompassing, it is little wonder that God, as He perceives it, “saves all the works of his hands.”¹⁸ This He does in a world far darker than the darkness that even the Hebrew Bible knows, describes, and laments—even darker than it fathoms. This, God does through Jesus, the perfect revelation of God and His unwavering devotion. This, He does in Jesus, whose light shines in the blackest dark to guide the children of God into the brightest light eternal.

“Therefore, let us glory, yea, we will glory in the Lord;
yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full;
yea, we will praise our God forever.
Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord?
Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy,
and of his long-suffering towards the children of men?
Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.”¹⁹

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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¹⁷ Psalm 103.^{3-5, 8-10}, author’s translation.

¹⁸ See DC 76.⁴¹

¹⁹ Alma 26.¹⁶