



God, the Jilted Lover

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For two weeks this past winter I holed up in a mountain cabin in Colorado. I brought along a suitcase full of books and notes, but at the end of the two weeks I found I had opened only one of the books: the Bible.

I began at Genesis and read straight through. Outside, snow was falling furiously. By the time I reached Deuteronomy, snow covered the bottom step; when I hit the Prophets it had crept up the mailbox post; and when I finally made it to Revelation, I had to call for a truck to un-bury the driveway. Over 60 inches of fresh powder fell during my time there.

Above all else, this is what struck me in my daily reading: Our common impressions of God may be very different from what the Bible actually portrays. In some theology books you might read of the decrees of God, and of such characteristics as omnipotence, omniscience, and impassability. Those concepts can be found in the Bible, but they are well buried and must be mined.

Simply read the Bible and you will encounter not a misty vapor but an actual Person. God feels delight, and anger, and frustration. Again and again he is shocked by human behavior. Sometimes, after deciding on a response, he “changes his mind.” I know, I know—the fancy word “anthropomorphism” is supposed to explain all those human-type portrayals. And yet, if you read the Bible straight through, as I did, you cannot help being overwhelmed by the joy and the anguish—in short, the passion—of the Lord of the universe.

To my surprise, Jeremiah affected me more than any other book, probably because that prophet expressed the passion of God with such emotional force. I came to view Jeremiah as a kind of companion to the Book of Psalms. What the psalms express about the inner side of being human, Jeremiah expresses about the inner side of being God.

True, God “borrows” images from human experience to communicate in a way we can comprehend, but surely those images point to an even stronger reality behind them. In the Book of Jeremiah, for example, two images prevail: that of an angry parent and a spurned lover.

The early chapters of the book show an offended parent trying to reason with a hopelessly rebellious child. God recounts how he led his children through a hostile desert, providing food and water along the way, and brought them into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. “I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me,” he says (3:19, NIV). Instead, the nation turned every direction but toward God. They went so far as to practice infant sacrifice, something—an omniscient God is speaking here!—“I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind” (7:31; 19:5).

The conversation between God and Jeremiah records the anger and futility, and behind that the pain, that every parent occasionally feels. Suddenly, a lifetime of selflessly given love appears wasted, scorned. Deep family hopes wither and die. The child seems bent on twisting a knife in the belly of his parents, flaunting before them behavior that “did not enter my mind.”

Jesus used an even more primal image from the animal kingdom as he wept before a city that a few days later would commit a form of eternal fratricide. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Matt. 23:37).

The Bible shows God’s power to force a Pharaoh to his knees and reduce mighty Nebuchadnezzar to a cud-chewing lunatic. But it also shows the impotence of power to bring about what God most desires: our love. When his own love is spurned, even the Lord of the universe feels in some way like a parent who has lost what he values most, or a mother hen who sits helpless as her brood flees toward danger.

The speeches in Jeremiah, sometimes in midsentence, shift away from a parental point of view and depict an even more intimate human relationship, that of a lover. Again and again, God uses the startling language of a cuckolded lover. He says of Judah,

... consider what you have done.

You are a swift she-camel

running here and there,

a wild donkey accustomed to the desert,

sniffing the wind in her craving—

in her heat who can restrain her? (2:23–24, NIV)

God’s tone in Jeremiah varies from such outraged cries of pain to warm sounds of love to a desperate plea for a new start. Those changing moods ring true to anyone who has been with a jilted lover in the kind of circumstances God describes.

A friend of mine endured two years of such pain. In November she was ready to kill her unfaithful husband. In February she had forgiven and moved back in. In April she filed for divorce. In August she abandoned the procedure and asked her husband to return. It took two years for her to face the truth that her love had been rejected forever, with no hope of healing.

The image of a wounded lover in Jeremiah (or in Hosea, where it is acted out in flesh) is an awesome one that I cannot comprehend. Why would the God who created all that exists subject himself to such humiliation from his creation?

In Colorado, as I read through the pages of the Bible, I was haunted by the reality of a God who lets our response to him matter that much. And when I returned to Chicago, and started thumbing through theology books, I realized afresh a danger in our study “about” God. When we tame him, in words and concepts, and file him away under alphabetized characteristics, we can easily lose the force of the passionate relationship God seeks above all else.

There may be no greater danger to those of us who write, talk, or even think about God. Mere abstractions, to him, may be the crudest insult of all. After two weeks of reading the entire Bible, I came away with the strong sense that God does not care so much about being analyzed. Mainly, he wants to be loved.