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KnoWhy #422 - Why the Book of Mormon's Depiction of a Loving God Fits with the Old Testament

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Abstract: If the Old Testament, which were Nephi's scriptures, depicts God as simply being angry, as some people assume, one wonders how Nephi might have come to view God as loving (1 Nephi 11:17). However, the Old Testament contains 5,871 verses that show God's love for His children out of a total of 23,145 verses, roughly one out of every four verses. The New Testament has 7,957 verses in it, thus the verses about God's love in the Old Testament are $\frac{3}{4}$ the length of the New Testament. In addition, part of what seems like anger in the Old Testament is simply the punishment the people brought upon themselves through disobedience to God.

WHY THE BOOK OF MORMON'S DEPICTION OF A LOVING GOD FITS WITH THE OLD TESTAMENT

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“He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him. Wherefore, he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation.”
2 Nephi 26:24

THE KNOW

In some parts of the Old Testament, the Lord can seem angry. In the book of Exodus alone, He killed the first-born of the Egyptians (Exodus 12:12), swore to wage a perpetual war against the Amalekites (17:16), and brought a plague upon His people when they disobeyed Him (32:35). Verses like this could make it seem like the Lord is always angry. But the Book of Mormon reminds us that this is an oversimplification. Nephi, for example, testified that God “loveth His children” (1 Nephi 11:17).¹ He also testified that God “doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him” (2 Nephi 26:24).

Yet if the Old Testament, which were Nephi’s scriptures, depicts God as being so angry, one wonders how Nephi might have come to view God as loving.² Considering this question, Jonathon Riley has noted that the Plates of Brass may have contained “more about God’s love than the Old Testament as we have it today. It is also possible

that Nephi simply knew about God’s love through revelation.”³ However, Nephi’s view of God suggests the possibility that the Old Testament really does depict God as loving, and that “many Christians simply have not read the Old Testament very carefully and have missed the ... verses in the Old Testament that show God’s love for humanity.”⁴

According to Riley, the Old Testament contains 5,871 verses that show God’s love for His children out of a total of 23,145 verses.⁵ Thus, roughly one out of every four verses in the Old Testament is about God’s love. As a point of comparison, the New Testament has 7,957 verses in it. As Riley observed, “This means that if the verses about the love of God in the Old Testament were compiled into a book, that book would be $\frac{3}{4}$ the length of the New Testament.”⁶

This information suggests that part of the reason people see God as being angry in the Old Testament is simply because they have not noticed all the verses that show

God's love. However, the Book of Mormon makes it clear why God sometimes seems angry in the Old Testament, and why terrible things sometimes happened to the Nephites.⁷

Lehi told his children, that if they “shall keep his commandments they shall be blessed upon the face of this land, and ... shall dwell safely forever” (2 Nephi 1:9). However, he also told them that “if the day shall come that they will reject the ... Messiah, ... the judgments of him that is just shall rest upon them ... and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten” (vv. 10–11). In the Old Testament, as in the Book of Mormon, people sometimes experienced terrible things when they turned from God. But God was merciful to all who repented.⁸

THE WHY

The Old Testament contains powerful statements about God's love for His children. In it, God comforts us by telling us, “I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people. ... I have broken the bands of your yoke, and made you go upright” (Leviticus 26:12–13). He reassures us that, “My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest” (Exodus 33:14). The Old Testament reminds us to “be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid ... for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

To those suffering economically, the Lord revealed to Hannah that, “He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory” (1 Samuel 2:8). To those who feel distant from God, He reminds us that “the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee” (Isaiah 54:10), and that “I have loved thee with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). To those in turmoil, God promises, “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them” (Ezekiel 37:26).

God has promised us, “I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord” (Hosea 2:19–20). With verses like this in mind, suddenly comments from the Book of Mormon, such as, “And he loveth those who will have him to be their God” (1 Nephi 17:40), and “he loveth our souls as well as he loveth our children” (Alma 24:14), don't seem out of place.

We too can read the Old Testament the way the Nephites seem to have read it and notice the many verses that describe God's love for us.⁹ As we do, we might come to see the Old Testament differently, and maybe feel God's love in our own lives as well.

FURTHER READING

Jonathon Riley, “Why the God of the Old Testament Is Not as Angry as You Thought,” at *Bible Jon's Musings*, March 21, 2018.

Steven L. Olsen, “Prospering in the Land of Promise,” *FARMS Review* 22, no. 1 (2010): 229–232.

RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Treaties and Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 48–61, 128–129.

David E. Bokovoy, “Love vs. Hate: An Analysis of Helaman 15: 1–4,” *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 22, no. 2 (2002): 2–3.

NOTES

1. For more on love in the Book of Mormon, see RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Treaties and Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 48–61, 128–129; David E. Bokovoy, “Love vs. Hate: An Analysis of Helaman 15:1–4,” *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 22, no. 2 (2002): 2–3.
2. See Book of Mormon Central, “What Parts of the Old Testament Were on the Plates of Brass? (1 Nephi 5:10),” *KnoWhy* 410 (February 22, 2018).
3. Jonathon Riley, “Why the God of the Old Testament Is Not as Angry as You Thought,” at *Bible Jon’s Musings*, March 21, 2018, online at biblejonsmusings.blogspot.com.
4. Riley, “Not as Angry as You Thought.”
5. Riley, “Not as Angry as You Thought.” This does not include the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, which might change this count significantly. If verses like Moses 7:28, 32–33, 37, which depicts God weeping for His children, were included, one might have an even greater number of verses that describe God’s love for humankind.
6. Riley, “Not as Angry as You Thought.”
7. For more on God’s love in the Book of Mormon, and why bad things sometimes happened to them, see Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Samuel Say the Lord ‘Hated’ The Lamanites? (Helaman 15:4),” *KnoWhy* 186 (September 13, 2016).
8. Steven L. Olsen, “Prospering in the Land of Promise,” *FARMS Review* 22, no. 1 (2010): 229–232.
9. For more on God’s love in the Book of Mormon, see Larry E. Dahl, “Faith, Hope, Charity,” in *The Book of Mormon: The Keystone Scripture*, ed. Paul R. Cheesman (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 137–150.