

Sunday 16th March 2025 - Know My Name: In The Name of a Violent God?

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] We're in this Sunday series that we've been doing, as Marie just said, called Know My Name, which is exploring the importance and significance of the names that we give ourselves, the names of people and places in the Bible, and the names we have for God.

Indeed, in recent weeks, I think we've seen that names matter because they're tied up with identity. They help signify who someone is and maybe what someone is about.

For example, as we looked at the other week, in the Bible, God identifies as Yahweh, a Hebrew name that we translate into English, meaning I am.

And that's it. It's not I am and then a name, you know, as in I am Matt or I am Groot or I am Spartacus or whatever. No, it's simply I am.

And again, as we said the other week, out of respect to not say God's name lightly, our Bibles tend to substitute this Yahweh, I am name of God for Lord.

[1 : 07] So whenever we read the word Lord, it's usually Yahweh, I am in the original language. But in many ways, I think we lose a little bit. It's a shame sometimes because I wonder if we lose the point of God's name being I am.

Yes, it's a pretty weird name. I grant you, I am. I am what? You know, it feels pretty open-ended. But maybe that's the point, I think, in that God's very name is an invitation to us and for us to go on a journey of discovery with God in working out just who God is and what God's about.

I am what? That's the discovery that we work out, it seems, with God. In fact, just like us, I'd say this journey of discovery is what the writers and the compilers of the Bible were on.

There was a whole range of people from all sorts of times and cultures trying their best to describe the God who they were discovering in their own time, in their own way, for themselves.

It's not that God simply dictated the right answers to everyone in the Bible. No, that's not the Bible at all. It's not a dictation. Instead, it's a big book made up of lots of other little books, each written by people just like you and me.

[2 : 34] People with their own personalities and agendas, people shaped, for better or worse, by their culture, the time they're living in. But people, nevertheless, honestly, genuinely trying to work out the character and the ways of God.

It's one of my favorite biblical scholars, a guy called Peter Enns. He puts it like this. He said, the Bible looks the way it does because God lets his children tell the story.

I like that. I like that. And yet, what I want to look at today, if we can, is what do we do in reading the Bible when the writers of the Bible sometimes describe God in ways that we find difficult?

In particular, what are we to make of the violence, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call our Old Testament, which is done in God's name or even said to be inflicted on people by God?

Well, to help us try and answer these questions, let's start with an ancient Hebrew name or title that some biblical writers use for God.

[3 : 52] And it's this word, Hebrew word, Sabaoth. Sabaoth. I want to do some Hebrew with me today. Should we say Sabaoth together? One, two, three. Sabaoth. Excellent.

Now, although it sounds like the word Sabbath, from where we get sort of rest and so on, it's not connected with that. Instead, this Hebrew word Sabaoth means hosts, hosts.

And when combined with God's name, Yahweh, we get Yahweh, Sabaoth, which comes out in our English as Lord of hosts. What does this mean, this host word?

Well, I think it's about God being over and above the whole host. We might say the whole multitude of heaven. This host includes the stars and the planets of the heavens above, but also the heavenly host, you know, the angels and the whole company of heaven, as we say.

Now, as such, this idea of Yahweh, Sabaoth, Lord of hosts. It's a big, cosmic, glorious, if you like, understanding of God.

[5 : 06] So that's used first, back in the book of 1 Samuel in the Bible. And it happens in a prayer by a woman called Hannah.

Hannah is childless, but longs for a son. And so, praise to God for help. Addressing God like this.

Yahweh, Sabaoth, she says. Lord of hosts. If you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me and not forget your servant, but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.

And it's an honest, heartfelt prayer. Since you are this Lord of hosts, of all that is above, if we say, please give me a son down here and I'll dedicate him to you.

And on this occasion for Hannah, everything aligns so that Hannah does conceive, giving birth to a son who will be called Samuel. But as the Bible goes on, what's interesting is that this Hebrew word, Sabaoth, which people assign to God, yes, it can be translated as hosts, but it can also, the same word, be translated as armies.

[6 : 29] Armies. So, Yahweh, Sabaoth, can also mean Lord of heaven's armies. Armies, which is quite a different idea about what God and the heavens are all about.

And so over time, and as the use of this Sabaoth title for God becomes more widely adopted, it begins to tie in, as we go through the Bible, with an increasingly common view of many of the Bible's writers who see God as a warrior God, a mighty God who fights, a God who is violent, a God who commands armies in battle.

And because of this armies meaning, when Yahweh, Sabaoth is translated into English in most of our Bibles, it's usually translated as Lord Almighty, Lord Almighty.

And this Almighty word, as you go through the scripture, it gradually becomes more and more associated with God. more associated, perhaps, with a God of physical might and strength and military muscle.

So, for example, a few chapters after we hear Hannah first pray to Yahweh, Sabaoth, as Lord of hosts, we read how her now grown-up son Samuel tells a guy called Saul, the king of Israel, what should be done to their enemies, a nation called the Amalekites.

[8 : 12] So, Samuel says this to Saul, he says, this is what the Lord Almighty says, I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel.

Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them. Put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.

Totally destroy them. Which is genocide, in other words. Totally destroy every man and woman, child and baby, and all of their livestock.

Which is pretty horrific, really. Pretty horrific. And yet it's what, on this occasion, Samuel says, the Lord Almighty, Yahweh Sabaoth, has commanded.

Now, as horrific as this command is, I think if you've ever tried to read the Old Testament, in particular the Hebrew Scriptures, you'll know that this theme of an incredibly violent God, who both commits violence and commands people to commit violence in his name, is pretty ever-present on the pages.

[9 : 34] So if we think about it, whether it's the story of the flood, which despite Noah's Ark being full of animals, it's not a children's story.

It really isn't. It's another story of genocide, really. Or think about the plagues of Egypt, which include God said to kill all the firstborn sons of the Egyptians.

Whether it's elsewhere, the violent plunder and destruction of cities in order for Israel to take the promised land. Or whether it's God saying that he'll force parents to cannibalize their own children because they'll be under siege for so long.

Jeremiah 19, verse 9, if you don't believe me. God, in the pages of the Bible, is often portrayed in a pretty monstrous way.

And indeed, if you top things up, it's reckoned there are around a thousand passages which speak of God's blazing anger and punishment by death and destruction.

[10 : 44] And over a hundred times, God is explicitly described by the Bible's writers as commanding people to kill. So what are we to do with that?

What are we to do with this? What are we to make of a God who, on the one hand, is said in loads of places to be merciful and rich in love and says in the Ten Commandments, you'd think pretty clearly, you shall not kill, but who is then said, on the other hand, to command people to murder and who seems to burn with excessive rage?

Well, I guess we have a choice in how we respond. Some people, I think they simply choose to ignore the Bible and in particular, these violent passages.

And maybe that's where you're at with this. And if so, I understand that. I really do. You know, so much of what we could read is an unpleasant, shocking read that maybe can turn us away from rather than towards God.

You know, perhaps therefore, perhaps we're wise to ignore it. But we can't deny, even in our ignoring of it, that it is in the Bible.

[12 : 08] It's one option. Alternatively, other people try to defend the Bible and its violence, holding the view that the violence God is said to unleash must be justified because God is God and God knows best and the ends must justify the means, however horrific those means might be.

And yet, aside from that being a God who I would want to run a mile from, if I'm honest, you'll know as well as me how dangerous that kind of justifying view can be because it's been used over the centuries to justify all sorts of atrocities that are said to have been conducted in God's name.

Instead, what I want to suggest today, and I think we'd do well to follow, is simply to see the Bible for what it is, which is a complete mix of views and attempted understandings.

So the Bible can contain profound insight and beauty and wisdom in its pages because sometimes these writers are tapping in to the very heart of who God is.

In other words, sometimes they get it. They get God. And God breathes through their timeless words of truth into us when we read it in ways which bring us life.

[13 : 44] I know that's often my experience. When you read something that is stunningly beautiful in the Bible, it brings me alive in that sense. And I think that's God's breath through those pages, through those words, bringing life.

And maybe you can identify with that too in some of the ways that you read the Bible. At other times though, it seems some of the biblical writers are way off in their understanding of God, attributing the most horrific actions to God because that's the kind of God they thought he was.

That's the kind of God they wanted him to be. And yes, because it's in the Bible, I'd say God breathes through those words too. But maybe in such a way that helps us to understand that this is not actually who God is.

And that view, I think it gives us permission. Indeed, I'd say it compels us to reject many of the ways in which God is portrayed in the Bible.

And I say that and I offer that approach because I think that's how we see Jesus himself read and engage with the Bible.

[15 : 04] See, I think Jesus is fully aware of this mix and that those who put the Bible together were on a journey of discovery, trying to discover who God truly is.

Sometimes, as we said, these writers get things beautifully right. And we see Jesus alluding to all sorts of passages, you know, most famously perhaps, when he quotes from the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus when saying what the greatest commandments are, you know, to love God and to love each other.

Words of timeless, loving truth. It is reckoned around 10% of all the words we've got of Jesus in the New Testament are him directly alluding to or quoting from the Old Testament passages and scriptures.

And if Jesus uses the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures in that way, if they're that important to Jesus, then we'd do well, I think, to embrace their importance too.

Other times, though, the characters and the writers of the Old Testament got God horribly wrong, I would say. Putting words in God's mouth and portraying God as doing things which were the complete opposite of God's true nature and character.

[16 : 26] And again, I think we see that Jesus is fully aware of this. For example, let's take an event in Luke's gospel at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

When Jesus gets up in the synagogue, the Jewish meeting place, to read the allocated scripture passage for the day, which is taken from Isaiah 61.

And Jesus reads it out loud. He says this. He says, The spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind to set the oppressed free to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. All of which sounds great. It sounds great.

Except, Jesus missed out a bit. He didn't finish the passage that he was given to read. Then he stops at the end, mid-sentence.

[17 : 38] It's like at a comma. He left out this line at the end. What he could have included was this. In the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance.

Of our God. But Jesus doesn't say that. He doesn't include that in what he reads. Now why would Jesus do this? Well I'd suggest it's because Jesus knew that Isaiah had got it wrong.

That vengeance and retribution is the opposite of God's merciful character. And Jesus, in not saying that, had come to correct that misunderstanding understanding of who God truly is.

And in fact, I think we see Jesus taking this approach with the scriptures time and time again. For example, in his sermon on the mount, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus quotes again various passages from the Old Testament saying things like, you have heard that it was said, you know, eye for eye, tooth for tooth kind of stuff.

But then he follows this up by declaring, but I tell you, do not resist an evil person, for example, and so on.

[18 : 57] And again, you've heard it said, but I tell you. I think it's suggesting that it's Jesus' way of challenging and correcting flawed Old Testament ideas by instead proposing a higher, more enemy-loving understanding of the way God calls us to live.

In fact, it's interesting that just before these but I tell you passages, Jesus says this, he says, do not think that I've come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I've not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. Now, when we read that, I think we tend to assume that fulfilling the law would mean keeping it perfectly, keeping it perfectly.

But as we read the Gospels, actually, Jesus breaks the law all the time. He doesn't keep it perfectly in that sense, especially with the rules about the Sabbath and what you can and can't do in the law on the Sabbath.

So instead, I'd say, Jesus fulfills the law fulfills the Old Testament not by keeping it perfectly but by perfecting it, by correcting mistaken conditions in order to help people truly live in God's ways.

[20 : 19] What's more, I think Jesus puts this approach into practice with his disciples, especially when they understandably perhaps but mistakenly slip into seeing God as a God of violence not mercy.

So again, for example, on one occasion two of Jesus' disciples, these brothers, James and John, they see some villagers who in their eyes are not giving Jesus the welcome that they think he deserves.

And so we're told this in Luke's Gospel. It says, when James and John saw this lack of welcome, they asked, Lord, do you want us to cool down fire down from heaven to destroy them?

Seems a pretty extreme reaction really, just for a bit of a snub. I guess that's why elsewhere Jesus calls James and John sons of thunder because it seems they have got a bit of a temper on them at times.

But really, I feel a bit sorry for James and John in this because they were just recalling what the Old Testament prophet Elijah was said to have done in response to him being challenged by an army captain.

[21 : 34] I mean, these verses here, they reflect a story that we can read about in 1 Kings which says this, that the captain went up to Elijah who was sitting on the top of a hill and said to him, man of God, the king says, come down.

And Elijah answered the captain, if I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your 50 men. Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men.

Now, whether or not we take that story of Elijah literally or not, James and John evidently think this is fair game. You know, that they'd be right in following Elijah's example.

And yet, how does Jesus respond to their suggestion of calling down fire from heaven? He responds like this, we're told, but Jesus turned and rebuked them.

And some later versions of Luke's gospel, they then include this verse. Jesus says, you do not know what kind of spirit you are of for the son of man, Jesus, did not come to destroy people's lives but to save them.

[22 : 55] It's a strong rebuke Jesus gives to this idea of fire from heaven. And one which is also a pretty damning verdict on Elijah.

You know, he's implying Elijah's ways were not always of God but we're here of a different spirit. A spirit who comes to destroy not save.

the theologian Derek Flood. He says this of this passage. He says, in rebuking James and John, Jesus expects his disciples, expects you and me to be making these same calls of knowing what to embrace in the Bible and what to reject.

Now, I guess the golden question is how do we know? How do we know what to embrace in the Bible and what to reject? Well, this is where we're not doing this discerning in our own wisdom but are instead able to read the Bible in tandem with God, with God's spirit, the spirit of all wisdom who guides and informs our approach.

So, the Apostle Paul in a letter he wrote to a church in Corinth, he puts it like this. He says, the person with the spirit makes judgments about all things.

[24 : 26] All things? Even the Bible? Well, yes, I would say. Yes. And as if to emphasize this, Paul then includes a quote from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in which the prophet says this, saying, who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?

You know, in other words, who dare question what the prophets are saying? Who dare question the Bible? And the next line, Paul responds pretty defiantly, saying, you might think that, Isaiah, but we, we have the mind of Christ, we have the benefit of knowing Jesus, in other words.

Indeed, through the spirit of Jesus, and by comparing what's said to have been done by God in the Bible with the lived example of Jesus, I think we're able, indeed, again, I'd say we're compelled to work out what's truly of God and what is not.

See, when we invite God's spirit into our hearts, I think we increasingly come to know, we know, the longer we spend with God, what's right.

we may not always act on it, I certainly don't, we may try to argue with it, I certainly do, but deep down, our conscience and our experience of knowing God tells us to trust that inner voice, you know, reminding us, reassuring us that ultimately, God is good, God is kind, God is merciful, and God is love.

[26 : 04] And the fruit of that same spirit in our lives is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, these are the ways of God and not violence, vengeance, aggression, retribution, murder, genocide, torture, and all manner of other grievous things which some of the writers of the Old Testament, I'd say mistakenly attributed to God.

Indeed, as we read these Old Testament texts of terror, as they're sometimes called, and the atrocities committed by people in God's name, I'd suggest our prime calling is to look for God not with the victors, but with the victims of this behaviour, with the oppressed and the enslaved and the scapegoats, for it's with them and in them that I think we'll see the face of Christ.

Now just a couple of points by way of conclusion for now. I think firstly in saying all this it's not as simple therefore as saying are Old Testament bad, New Testament good.

You know, there is plenty in the Old Testament in the Hebrew Scriptures that speaks of God's love and mercy, that gets God spot on, that gets God right, in other words.

and to think otherwise would do a great disservice to the gift that is the Bible. But I suggest there's also plenty in the New Testament which is problematic too, not least the way it seems to condone slavery, the violence associated with God in Revelation which sounds Old Testament-y in some ways often, but also in the Gospel accounts where the writers particularly Matthew think he seems sometimes to be hanging on to a God of vengeance and that even if they themselves would want to commit to a life of peace they don't necessarily see God as being peaceful.

[28 : 16] But that's a discussion for another time about how we might weigh up the writers of the New Testament. I guess what I'm saying though is let's not give up on the Bible even if we're tempted to sometimes because in it we find the love of God and we find words of life even if we sometimes have to dig for the treasure it contains.

But then secondly what are we to do with this word almighty this word which is associated in the Bible with so many violent acts supposedly undertaken by God or done in God's name?

Well as I said the other week it's interesting Jesus doesn't use this word of God not once does he address God as almighty and I think that should give us food for thought however my suggestion would be not that we ditch this word but that we reclaim almighty as a title for God who is mighty but not in aggressive military muscle kind of ways but instead who is mighty in love and mighty in kindness and mighty in compassion in wonder and in glory that and as I'll pick up on Palm Sunday in a few weeks time that is the way I think we're intended to see God as Yahweh Sabaoth you know the Lord of hosts not as a warrior God but as the God of the heavenly host who is with us through Jesus and now by his spirit helping us to put his ways of love and joy and peace into practice

Amen