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GETTING TO KNOW YOU

How the Holy Bible reveals God

In the 1956 Rogers and Hammerstein's musical film *The King and I* we are treated to a memorable song with one of those tunes that it is difficult to get out of your head, once it is in there! In the story, an English governess travels to Siam (now Thailand) to become a teacher for the king's many children. As there are so many children, it will be a real challenge for the governess to truly get to know them, as she explains to them in her song. Its all very twee, and fits so very well in this very entertaining tragic-comic musical, in which we encounter both pain and pathos, in addition to a growing love between governess and her royal charges, as well as her growing platonic love for the irascible king. But it is the chorus of the song that most people can remember best. Its memorable words run:

*Getting to know you,
Getting to know all about you.
Getting to like you,
Getting to hope you like me.*

Do human beings gain an instant knowledge of God, even when they yield their lives to Him and become

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His followers? Indeed, can human beings gain such a knowledge — are they capable of such knowledge? In the context of this book this is a question that we do need to explore, as we review the often vague interpretations of the Godist philosophy of what the nature of ‘god’ may be and how ‘he’ or ‘it’ can in some sense become all things to all men. From a specifically Christian viewpoint it might be added that there must be a sense of suspicion about any idea of an ‘instant’ and all inclusive revelation of God, because this seems to be precisely the way that He did NOT make Himself known to people as revealed by the Scriptures. These Scriptures were written and compiled, in the case of the Old Testament, over a period of circa 2,000 years, but they concern events that date back in some cases much further. We must look, then, at the overall quality and thrust of the message of the *whole* Bible in order to achieve a good understanding of Who God is, and what He requires of us. But in saying this we also need to keep firmly in mind that most profound statement of Jesus — that anyone who has seen Jesus has seen the Father (John 14:9). Jesus is the perfect revelation of the nature of God. So the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the early church at Colossae (in modern Greece) that Jesus is the **image of the invisible God** (Colossians 1:15) and that in Jesus **all the fullness of the deity lives** (Colossians 2:9). If readers have the time they may want to follow up for themselves the full scope of Paul’s argument by reading Colossians 1:1 through to 2:15.

The Torah

We will consult the first five books of the Old Testament for this initial review of the manner in which God began to disclose His Divine nature to the world through the Hebrew people. The first five books of the Old Testament

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(Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) are variously known as the ‘Torah’ (from the Hebrew word meaning ‘instruction’, as this collection is known in Jewish tradition), or the Pentateuch in Christian tradition, from the Greek, meaning ‘five books’

If readers are looking for a basic introduction to the Bible, then they may be interested in the author’s earlier book, *The Birth of Christ*¹ which contains a short appendix looking at the Holy Bible and why Christians consider it both truthful and dependable. However there are plenty of good books that look at the veracity of the Holy Bible, so genuine searchers will not have to look too hard for excellent research articles on this subject. Although we speak of an ‘Old’ and a ‘New’ Testament, these terms are used in this book solely because they are universally understood and recognized. In some ways it is helpful to think of the *Old Testament* as ‘*The Promise*’ and the *New Testament* as ‘*The Fulfilment of the Promise*’, as so much of the Old consists of ‘signposts’ pointing towards the future Messiah, whilst the New is the record of the birth, life, death and resurrection of that same Messiah, as well as other promises as yet unfulfilled, concerning the bodily return of the Lord Jesus to this world.

So just how did Almighty God make Himself known through history, as recorded in the Holy Scriptures? And how has He disclosed Himself through those same Scriptures? It seems that He chose to introduce Himself to His world gradually and to have used the Hebrew people, His chosen people, to be the foundation on which He would build His superstructure of self-revelation. It needs to be said straight away, that the Hebrew people were themselves

¹ Peter Sammons *The Birth of Christ* – Glory to Glory Publications, 2006 ISBN 0-9551790-1-7, and see Appendix 4

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double-minded and often rebellious in their attitude to God, and were repeatedly unfaithful to Him. No religiously observant Jew would today deny this, and indeed some Jews attribute the ultimate reason for their nation's many periods of wandering and subjugation to their serial sins against God, as He was forced time and time again to withdraw His blessing from them.

This book avoids straying into the rather sterile debates about creation, evolution and the 'how' of the building of this physical world in which we find ourselves. Readers are also invited to put that particular philosophical cul-de-sac to one side — it's a debate for a different sort of book! We acknowledge there can be two legitimate but in many ways opposed views about how these creation accounts are meant to be understood — as either literal or as allegorical accounts that lead to the same broad conclusion — that *God created this world and created it as a totally fit dwelling place for humans*. The author of this book would simply state his own view that the Holy Bible is to be interpreted as literal where style and context make it obvious that this is the intention of the writer and should be read in the plainest sense possible, unless the context is clearly demanding a different interpretation. We proceed now to look at how God interacted with the key figures of the Old Testament and within the history of Israel, as both these are foundational to the way that God has made Himself known to the world at large.

It is in Genesis chapter 2 that we encounter the creation and naming of mankind. Having created the heavens and the earth, as well as living creatures, God created what this author thinks of as *homo spiritualis*, that first man to whom He would disclose Himself and with whom God would build a relationship of love and trust. So we read: **When the**

LORD God made the earth and the heavens (Genesis 4a) ... the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 7)

God's relationship with man, then as now, is one of initiative: God created men and women in his own spiritual image (Genesis 1:27). Later in chapter 2 God 'formed' the man and gave to him the role of carer of the Garden which the Bible calls Eden. God's first instruction to Man was to warn of the dangers of knowledge of good and evil. There's an old saying in the English language that 'a little knowledge is dangerous' and perhaps there was something of this thought in God's heart as He considered the pain and sorrow and waste entailed in rebellion ('sin') against God, which pain and sorrow and waste will inevitably be entailed in that 'knowledge of good and evil'. Some time later God took the initiative in calling Abraham to leave the place where he was living, Haran, and to travel to the land that He, God, would show to Abraham. God makes His key promise to Abraham, to make him into a 'great nation' in chapter 12:22. In chapter 22 God reminds Abraham that **"through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed"** (v. 18). Already we see that blessing is in God's heart, and we find that this urge to bless — to bring good outcomes — is foundational to all that God does.

For the time being we bypass the account of God's dealings with the Hebrews through Genesis and Exodus and rejoin them in their wanderings between the time when they were slaves in Egypt, and the time that they take control of the land of Canaan — their 'promised land'. God demands obedience from the Hebrews as in a very real sense, He demands it from all people today. Deuteronomy 4:2 gives us **"Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract**

from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.” It’s a recurring thought in this book, that Godism entails both adding to what God has said and surreptitiously deleting or downplaying (subtracting) other things. Godism then, reformulates God’s revelation so as to make it fit with the Godist ‘theology’. In Deuteronomy 5 the *Ten Commandments* are repeated (they had already been given in Exodus 20). These Commandments are worth looking at in detail, as they reflect the heart of all God’s commands. In the text immediately below, sequential Commandment numbering is added by the editor, for ease of reference:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me.”^[1]

“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”^[2]

“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”^[3]

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within

your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.^[4]

“Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.^[5]

“You shall not murder.^[6]

“You shall not commit adultery.^[7]

“You shall not steal.^[8]

“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.^[9]

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor’s house or land, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”^[10]

These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.

Let’s now briefly unpack a little of these Commandments, given by God to Moses, and see what they reveal about the true heart of God.

The Ten Commandments

That God is good is a foundational theme running right through the Bible, both Old and New Testaments — which

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as we said earlier, can be thought of as the *promise* and the *fulfilment of the promise* of the Messiah — or the Saviour. When addressed as ‘good teacher’ by the rich young man in Mark 10:17, Jesus’ immediate response is to say **“Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone”**, after which Jesus recounted several of the Ten Commandments. Later we will look again at this encounter between the Lord Jesus and the wealthy and powerful young man, but for now we revert to Deuteronomy chapter 5 as we unpack the essence of the Commandments one by one.

“You shall have no other gods before me.”^[1]

Because God is holy and is light, only He can redeem us and sanctify us. If we elevate anything else or anyone else to the position of ‘god’ in our lives, then ultimately that thing or person will bring us to ruin, precisely because it or they will have replaced the position in our hearts that should be reserved for God alone. God knows what is good for us, and desires to give us what is good for us. If we have ‘gods’ before Him, then ultimately we must suffer (and suffer terribly) and this is something God desperately desires to avoid.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”^[2]

This command again must be a challenge to the Godist philosophy, as many of the world’s religions do indeed create

idols and images. The Godist needs to explain whether God has forgotten Commandment No 2! We have seen in the previous chapter that one of the inherent characteristics of God is his immutability (or unchangeability). To assume that Commandment No 2 no longer applies suggests that God is untrue to Himself. It is for the Godist to explain this away, especially where they consider themselves to be ‘Christian’ in addition to Godist, as some do. The phrase jealous God is one that sits uncomfortably with modern westerners. We invest that word ‘jealous’ with all that’s cheap and nasty in the ugly human emotion that we call jealousy. But this is not what God means when he describes Himself as a jealous God. What He means is that the place that should belong to Him alone, in our hearts, will bring us pain and disaster if it is given to someone or something else. That is something that God will not tolerate. He loves those who have put their trust and faith in His Son and who will therefore be with Him forever as they go on believing. When this lovely outcome is threatened by ‘gods’ and idols, God is quite simply angered. In this way He jealously guards His own position. Other references to the holy jealousy of God are found in Exodus 20:5; Exodus 34:14; Deuteronomy 4:24; 6:15 and Joshua 24:19. Readers may want to follow these up in their own Bible.

“You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.”^[3]

This is a particularly serious sin, in God’s eyes. Our reference to God should be in the context of His holiness, and our ultimate unworthiness. It is in this context that we have to view the profane ways in which God’s name is used and abused by the world at large. Some seek to co-opt God

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to support their narrow factional viewpoints. That in itself is to cheapen God's name. But even worse, possibly, is the jocular and dismissive manner in which His holy Name is used and abused in the commonest of every day talk. We use again as a metaphor for this attitude the BBC's light entertainment industry, where most sitcoms and most dramas seem to find ways of sneering at God's holy name. Of course it is not just the BBC! Abuse of God's name is something that is prevalent throughout (certainly) the western world, although such use and abuse does seem to be noticeably less prevalent in US TV output, a sign perhaps of the greater religiosity of that nation. But God warns quite straightforwardly that this attitude of irreverence will face its day of reckoning.

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” ^[4]

God demands a weekly period of rest and reflection, firstly so that men, women and children will have the opportunity to draw close to Him and to recharge their spiritual batteries, but secondly because the rhythm of life that God has Himself created demands that we rest. God is

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angered when the poor are exploited and forcing people to work on days that should be dedicated to rest and worship is, quite simply, forbidden. Societies that flout this divine Law find themselves with increasing social problems. It was the UK that in 1994 finally decided to legalise Sunday trading and thus removing, at a stroke, the last vestige of effective protection for ordinary shop workers and attendant support services. One cannot help but wonder whether this is a powerful contributory factor to the intractable problems of the UK's social underclass, as well as some of the wider problems that affect all of UK society. People who cannot find time to be with and enjoy their families will ultimately find it harder to hold those families together.

“Honour your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.” [5]

Again God's interest in families is underlined. Respect for parents is an aspect of love. When families stay together, it seems that longevity really is increased.

“You shall not murder.” [6]

Human life, which is created by God in His own image, is sacred. For the avoidance of doubt, God has stated clearly that the unlawful and premeditated taking of life is sinful. Murderers will be held to account. It is unclear that all *the religions* hold this high ethic of the sacredness of human life — another challenge to Godism.

“You shall not commit adultery.” [7]

Marriage, which is ordained by God (surely a subject for a different sort of book!) and which is sacred, is not to

be broken by adultery — extramarital sexual relations — whether in a casual context or in the context of an ‘affair’. Adultery attacks families, and ruins both relationships and lives. God cares deeply about this and is angered by it. Once again there are key differences in the attitude of *the religions* to the sacredness of marriage, another challenge to the Godist philosophy, if they claim that we all worship a single ‘god’. If they believe in multiple ‘gods’ then the problem remains, why the difference in presentation of this most foundational of all human relationships?

“You shall not steal.” [8]

Taking from others, almost always from people who are weaker, damages people’s most basic interests. What people work for or are lawfully given should not be unlawfully appropriated by anyone else. Breaking this Commandment strikes at the foundation of the laws of most countries. When stealing happens, people get hurt in all sorts of ways — including, ultimately, the thieves themselves.

“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.” [9]

If people cannot believe ‘testimony’ as given then many aspects of normal social and economic life become quite impossible. Where the false witness brings direct trouble to an innocent person, then this is doubly reprehensible. A Godist will need to explain in this regard the Islamic doctrine of *taqiyya* (or dissimulation) and explain how this doctrine meshes with the ninth Commandment of the Holy Bible.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor’s house or land,

his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”^[10]

Covetousness is close to stealing in a moral sense. By wanting what is not yours you can come to idolize that thing that you covet. This takes us back to Commandments Nos 1 and 2. Covetousness eats away at the soul and at the mind. It can lead to theft, to murder, to adultery and to lying. Covetousness undermines relationships — and relationships of love and integrity are closest to the heart of Almighty God.

In summary the Ten Commandments give a clear indication of the practical outworkings in daily life demanded by a God Whose heart is set on those things that are best for humankind. The Ten Commandments show us a God Who is good as well as demanding. A parent who loves their child will often be very demanding as they seek to bring out the best, to bring out the fullest potential of that child and to set them up for a good life. So too, God is demanding because He knows that only by helping us to tread a narrow path, which is ultimately required by these Commandments, can we hope to live out life as He wants us to, with a measure of security and certainty. In Deuteronomy chapter 8 God reminds His children not to forget Him, especially when life is pleasant: be careful (verse 11) **“ . . . that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day.”** Once they forget, and life becomes good for them in this new promised land, (verse 14) **“then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”** And, God warns, rather than attributing peace and security to Him, they will

begin to think that they have secured their own destiny (verse 17) **You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’** Finally God gives a solemn warning to His chosen people, one to be repeated so many times through Scripture (verse 19) that **“If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other ‘gods’ and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be destroyed.”** Idol worship would not be tolerated by God. Will it be today? The Hebrews flirted with idolatry throughout the Old Testament period and *time and time again* this was the sinful act that caused God to remove His blessing from them. This was not so much intolerance on the part of God, although God does of course have the absolute and sovereign right to be intolerant! Rather, idol worship brought in its train many evils, the chief of which was the sacrifice of children to these false ‘gods’.

God warned the Israelites not to take their possession of Canaan for granted. Deuteronomy 9:4 shows the real reason why God oversaw and planned the complete defeat and complete subjugation of the Canaanites: **After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, “The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you.** The evils entailed in extreme idolatry were deeply offensive to God — especially, once again, the reality of child sacrifice.

Whilst some Bible critics like to characterize the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus as depicting an ‘angry’ Old Testament God and compare this unfavourably with a loving New Testament God, these same books give us a good insight into God’s primary motivations. So in Deuteronomy

10:17–19 we read. **For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.** We begin to get a sense of the Lord's social priorities in these verses. He accepts no bribes. Nor should we. It does seem to be highly relevant how political and commercial corruption holds back and retards social development in what we today call the 'developing world'. There is a growing realization today that corruption in all its forms acts as a brake on social progress. What God condemned three millennia ago remains a scourge today. Similarly, God's heart is inclined towards the weak and social outcasts, for whom He demands special concern. So the fatherless and widows are defended by God. Woe betide those who seek to injure these most vulnerable people. And those who are refugees are to be loved, in the way that Jesus would reiterate some 1,500 years later. Jesus then told a parable about a 'good Samaritan' who acted as a loving neighbour to an injured traveler, assaulted by robbers and left for dead.

So in Deuteronomy 11, God reminds the Israelites to love Him so that He in turn will provide for them. But He warns them once more of the prospect of His anger where they are enticed away by false 'gods':

Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commands always.

“So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the LORD your God and to serve

him with all your heart and with all your soul—then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and oil.”

Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the LORD’s anger will burn against you, and he will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the LORD is giving you.

Once again these commands may seem harsh to modern eyes, but the underlying principle is consistent with a God of love who physically drives out from His promised land the scourge of evil religion — and we need to continually remind ourselves of that evil, involving the sacrifice of children and of shrine prostitution. Promise and warning go together in Deuteronomy:

“If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow—to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him — then the LORD will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and stronger than you.”

(Deuteronomy 11:22 – 23)

“See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse — the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known.” (Deuteronomy

11:26–28)

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More than this, God demands a complete and permanent break with the false religions of Canaan and the surrounding countries. And so he commands: **“Destroy completely all the places on the high mountains and on the hills and under every spreading tree where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places.”** (Deuteronomy 12:2–3)

Knowing the weakness and duplicity of the human heart, God warns the Israelites very clearly of the dangers that lie ahead and of the real evils entailed in the worship of false gods — which He will not tolerate in any way, shape or form. Again what follows sounds harsh but we need to remember two clear things: first that all these commands were given to a particular people at a particular time in history. Their detailed outworkings are no longer required of humans today. So critics cannot legitimately argue (as some try to) that the Christian Bible is much the same as the other sacred writings used by the various religions which contain bellicose rules that remain applicable today. And second, we must remember that without an absolute determination to remain pure, the Israelites would soon be sucked into the evils of *the religions* around them — and sadly they were. The following verses are selected from Deuteronomy chapter 13. Readers should note the verse numbers, which are not consecutive, and read the entire chapter to get a clearer grasp of God’s clear instructions:

**¹If a prophet or one who foretells dreams says, “Let us follow other gods and let us worship them,”
³you must not listen to the words of that prophet or**

dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul⁵That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery; he has tried to turn you from the way the LORD your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you.⁶ If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods that neither you nor your fathers have known,⁷ gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other),⁸ do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him.⁹ You must certainly put him to death. Your hand must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people.

We are bound to repeat, these rules were time-limited in their application, in the sense that they applied to the Hebrew people entering into and then defending their promised land. It is unclear if these commands were ever carried out in practice. Indeed the cyclical rebellion of the Hebrews against God, by intermittently chasing after other ‘gods’ suggests that these rules were honoured more in the breach than in the observance! But even here in these undoubtedly harsh commands there is no sign that God was seeking a sort of knee jerk reaction in these situations. In Deuteronomy 13:14, God tells the Israelites that, before taking any action, they are to **enquire, probe and investigate thoroughly** and that only if true that **a detestable thing has been done among you** may they then apply the death penalty. Once

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again we have a sense of God making provision for the application of true justice in an otherwise unjust world.

We need to remember, as God clearly understood, that these were primitive times when Deuteronomy was given to the Hebrew people. This was the late bronze age, prior even to the iron age. There was no social insurance. The economies of the time could not support any of the ideals that we today think so important. There were no hospitals, schools or infrastructure in any way that we would recognize. The need for justice to be enshrined for the ordinary people was an important objective in God's laws. Warfare was never far away, in these times of petty kings who often led petty kingdoms. Kings, it might be added, whose word or whim was law. Israel was qualitatively different from any of the other nations, in its monotheism and in its laws that were designed to protect the weak and to yield true justice. Warfare was never far away as pagan kings all too often sought to resolve their problems through the sword. God's commands, as far as they referred to the evil of war, were concerned with the protection of the weak. So we have the inevitable situation of what happens when women are captured by a victorious Hebrew army. Only marriage was contemplated by God and the restriction on Hebrew military victors (men) was telling:

When you go to war against your enemies and the LORD your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife. Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has lived in your house and mourned her father and mother for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband

and she shall be your wife. If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her. (Deuteronomy 21:10–14)

This was a powerful disincentive, indeed, to any desire to forcibly take and then discard captive women. In the context of the day, these commands were exceptional. In today's parlance, we might say that God had demanded a cooling off period — there was to be no immediate gratification, and no treatment of the captive as a slave. No, she was to be taken — if at all — as a wife. This immediately implies offspring, responsibility to offspring and to inheritance rights. Furthermore, if a man decided later that he was no longer interested in this woman — for whatever reason — then she must be allowed to go 'wherever she pleases' because she has been dishonoured by the man. This implies she might return to her own kith and kin, or go anywhere else. And the man may not sell her or treat her as a slave. With the inevitable drain on family resources entailed in taking on wives, these were powerful disincentives to the enticements of casual fancies. We may presume that many women were saved from much heartache by the simple existence of this command, a command that it would be difficult for a soldier to circumvent under the witness of his compatriots.

So God's focus here is on protection of the weak and defenceless. It remains for the Godist to explain how this command ties in with the teachings of the various religions on use and abuse of captives in war. The fact that Western history in particular and Christian history in general shows that people who call themselves Christian have become involved in warfare, cannot be counter-argued to the effect that Christianity is as 'guilty' as *the religions* in

this regard. That some people who have called themselves Christian and have thought that they were fighting on God's 'side' may be a fact of history — that those same people attempted to use this as some sort of 'justification' for their actions may also be true but it is difficult (with integrity) to sustain as a counter-argument — or a side-stepping *argument of convenience!* Those who plan and conduct temporal warfare cannot use the Bible either as a general or as a specific justification for that warfare. It is readily acknowledged however that the Bible might be appealed to by some genuine Christians in developing an argument that warfare can in some circumstances represent *the lesser of two evils*.

If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love, when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love. He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him. (Deuteronomy 21:15–17)

The first thing to say in looking at this passage is that the Hebrew tradition was in bronze age times, has remained since (and has been inherited by the Church), that a man can marry only one wife. Here God seems to recognize the unhappy reality that there will be circumstances where a man actually has, for whatever reason, more than one wife. How, in these circumstances, must he behave? Again God's first thought and primary thought, is to the defence of the weak. The prohibition on favouring children of one wife over another, would have been a powerful disincentive

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(a) to take more than one wife in the first place and (b) to discriminate against children of the unfavoured (or ‘unloved’) wife. It should be added that, again, such a circumstance of unhappy marriage would have been under the observation of the Hebrew community as a whole, so it would have been difficult for a man to circumvent this command. We may presume that many real day to day family problems were avoided in the first place by this command in Deuteronomy.

In exactly the same way, God commands protection for the weak and marginalized (and that always meant women) in marriage violations — see Deuteronomy 22:13 through 30. And God commands the use of fair and accurate measures in trading (Deuteronomy 25:13 through 16). Plainly there will always be a disparity in bargaining power between people who are trading. God’s heart is for justice to be done in such situations, but again with an emphasis on protecting the weak. We will close this chapter on ‘getting to know’ God and the way that He progressively began to disclose His true nature through Deuteronomy with a few final thoughts on that book.

Deuteronomy

More than 80 Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament are from Deuteronomy. The Lord Jesus focused attention on Deuteronomy when he summarized the essence of the Old Testament Law (Matthew 22:37) in the two great commandments of love for God and love for neighbour. Jesus also quoted Deuteronomy (actually 6:13 and 16, and 8:3) in responding to the devil’s temptations — see Matthew 4:4–10. The primary need for love toward God and neighbour were to become the basic belief and ethic of the early church and has remained so ever since. The book

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of Deuteronomy is thus one of vital importance to the Lord and should be for His followers today.

To think of Deuteronomy as a ‘second law’ is misleading. The author, Moses, is primarily concerned with Israel’s relationship with God and their determination to maintain that relationship in their own and their children’s lives. Although the Ten Commandments are repeated, the focus is placed very much on the first Commandment which explicitly requires exclusive devotion to God. Moses’ emphasis is not legalistic. Although he did warn of the need to keep all of God’s laws (Deuteronomy 28:1, 58) his message as a whole is clear that he is not concerned solely about legalistic compliance. Rather, the key message of Deuteronomy is the unique relationship that has been established between a unique God with His unique people, the Israelites. Love is the key word in that relationship. Moses boldly asserted that **The Lord our God is one Lord; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.**² All the other commandments as set out in chapters 5 through 11 depend on this foundational ‘Law’. The Israelites were never to forget that God had chosen them to be His people, not the other way around! So in Chapter 7 and verses 7 through 9 we read: **The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore**

² chapter 6:4,5 — and taken from the *Revised Standard Version* which seems to capture the essence more accurately than most English language translations.

that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. They were to fulfil God's judgment on the Canaanites, who had been spared from judgment since Abraham's time (Genesis 15:16). Although the Israelites did not themselves merit God's love, it was in love and mercy that He had rescued them out of Egypt.

Love of the 'alien' is second in importance to undivided love for God. Love for the neighbour or traveller is basic to all other human obligations and so the Israelites were commanded in Leviticus 19:9–18

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

Do not steal.

Do not lie.

Do not deceive one another.

Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him.

Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

Do not go about spreading slander among your people.

Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's

life. I am the LORD.

Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

Social obligations were rooted in a person's relationship with God. As a people who had benefited from God's love, the Israelites were to show that love to others. God loves the stranger, the widow and the orphan: if anyone claims to love God, therefore, they are under an obligation to display that love to other people. God is concerned about justice and righteousness. Someone who professes to love God will share and display those same concerns. So, the Hebrew people were to be known for their concern for people whose social position exposed them to exploitation and oppression. Readers who want to get a good appreciation of the whole scope of Deuteronomy are directed to the article on that subject in the *Baker Encyclopaedia of the Bible*³ which makes this interesting observation: the profound humanitarian spirit of the Mosaic law stands in unique contrast to the approximately contemporary Babylonian *Code of Hammurabi* and the Assyrian and Hittite legal codes, which contained no vital consciousness of a love relationship with the deity. The deeply humanitarian spirit of Deuteronomy is reflected again in these extracts which readers may want to follow up separately:

Canaan's abundant blessings should be shared with neighbours (Dt 14:22 – 15:23)

In human relationships justice was to prevail among the Hebrews (Dt 16:18 – 21:23)

³ Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, ISBN 8010 2139 1 (4 volume set).

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In domestic and social relationships the law of love was to prevail (Dt 22:1 – 26:19)

It only needs to be added, as we draw to a conclusion, that the Lord Jesus would come into conflict with the religious leaders of His day because they had replaced the essence of the Law with a maze of legalism. For Jesus, the greatest commandment was to love God, and the second was to love one's neighbour. Those two commandments, if kept perfectly, provide the basis for eternal life (see Matthew 22:37–39, also Mark 12:29–31, and finally Luke 10:27–28). Christians believe that the climax of God's self-disclosure of love came in the man, Jesus Christ. For Christians, then, responding to God's love means to accept Jesus in wholehearted devotion; to become, in other words, His disciples. And in addition, to love one's neighbour as Jesus so clearly demonstrated in His life.

The moral perfection and moral precision of God's law, as revealed in the Old Testament (and later as we shall see, consummated in the New Testament) must inevitably be compared to the precise moral requirements of the laws of *the religions*. It is simply a straightforward side-stepping of the problem (and it *is* a problem, though Godists try to avoid it) to say that the essence of *the religions* and of the Holy Bible are much the same. The Godist also side-steps the problem of how devout followers of *the religions* work out their devotion to their religious laws in practice, as compared with the absolute moral requirements clearly laid down in the Holy Scriptures. Finally, we repeat, the detailed and sometimes legalistic requirements of the Old Testament Law, whilst they *do* provide to modern people at least clear guidance as to how to order our priorities and direct our concerns for the poor and oppressed, they are no longer legal

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requirements for a true child of God, for that same Law has now been fulfilled (completed) in Jesus. We will explore this theme later in this book,⁴ but we finish with the words of Jesus on this matter: **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”** (Matthew 5:17)

⁴ See Chapter 12

