

Where was GOD?

Dr Michael Jarvis

When devastating events occur, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, plagues and individual human traumas, many people ask; Where was God?



How people react to these destructive events depends a lot on their concept of God.

Those who believe in God react according to their understanding of his character and **how they think he should be operating in the world in order to be consistent with his character.**

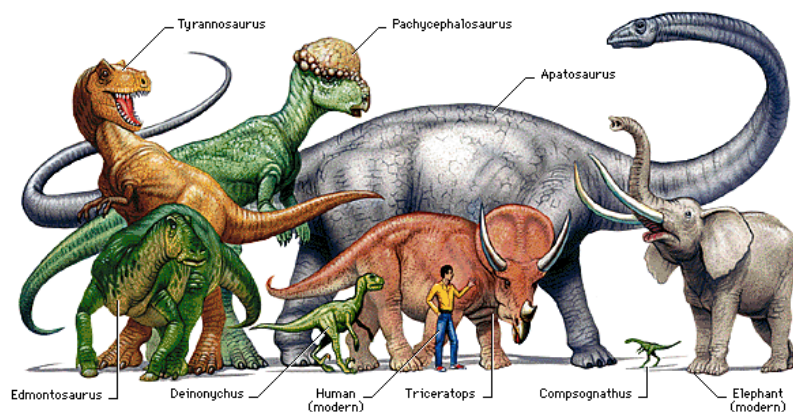
Clearly it is important to have a correct understanding of God's character.

The Bible states that God is unchanging and so we should be able to determine aspects of his character from creation, human history, the life and teachings of Jesus, writings of the early church and even from personal experiences of God acting within our lives. What we can learn from each of these sources should agree.

Our definition of character

Character can be described as the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual. This can include the combination of mental characteristics and behaviour that distinguish a person. We also need to consider how character is revealed through the methods used to bring about desired goals.

Revelations about God from creation



Important aspects of creation that may comment on the character of God

1. The fossil record shows that life on earth has changed over vast time scales.
2. A fundamental feature of all life has been its mortality, as shown by the fossil record.
3. The whole complex web of life is held together by a system of food chains where living things feed on other living things and the interactions related to these food chains result in the vitally important 'balance of nature'.
4. Many creatures that once thrived on earth are now extinct. One example is over 400 species of dinosaurs that were wiped out.
5. The major extinction events enabled other life forms to inhabit the earth. For instance, extinction of the dinosaurs made the earth suitable for mammals, including mankind.
6. The dinosaur age was a time when the earth was warmer and wetter and much of it was covered by dense forests. These forests produced our coal deposits but also provided abundant food for the dinosaurs, many of which weighed many tons and required enormous food intake. Their ability to feed on large vegetation produced some open spaces, enabling smaller creatures to exist.
7. Many of the extinctions were caused by events such as meteor strikes on the earth or by massive changes in the earth's climate due to volcanic activity or due to other processes that form an intricate part of the way God has made the earth.

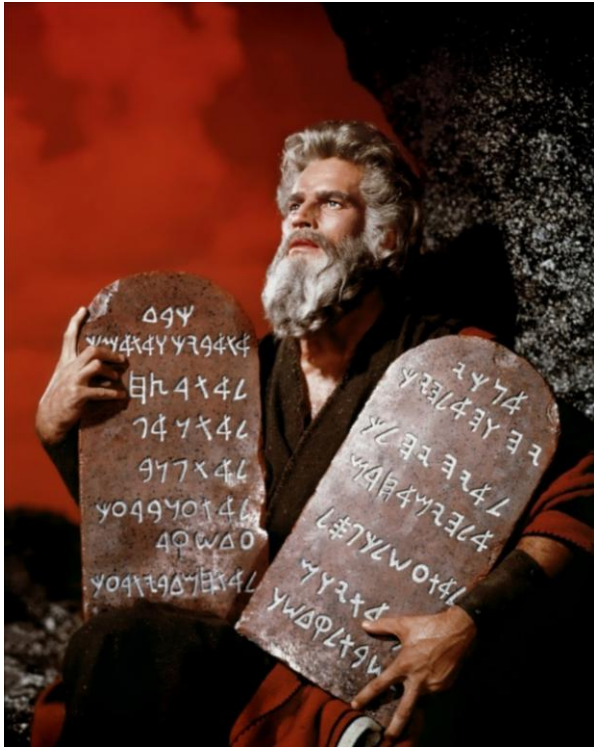
Possible conclusions about God's character through the study of how he acts in his creation

1. The Creator has vast wisdom and access to awesome power.
2. He uses short term goals that are designed to achieve greater long term goals.
3. To achieve long term goals God at times pushes aside or destroys short term realities that no longer harmonise with longer term goals.
4. For God 'the end goals justify the means he used to achieve them'.
5. The Creator has ordained that physical death is an essential part of how living systems can survive within a balanced ecology, ensuring maintenance of a balance that enables this earth to remain a suitable home for life and for mankind.
6. God does not consider physical death to be a breakdown in his original plans. He ordained that death was a fundamental necessity for life on earth.

God's character revealed through history

The Creator's actions during human history can be studied through analysis of the biblical record and in particular relating to the Israelite nation.

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At Mount Sinai God revealed much about his character to Moses, including giving him the ten commandments.

He described himself to Moses as; *Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And as he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation"* (Exodus 34:4-7 NIV Bible translation).

Some events of history with potential to highlight aspects of God's character

1. He rescued the Israelites but destroyed the Egyptian firstborn and army.
2. He used just one key person, Moses, to initiate and guide the events in Egypt.
3. Many of those who left Egypt with the Israelites were not Israelites by birth.
4. Many of those who came out of Egypt were later killed during judgments by God against their rebellion.
5. He gave clear demonstrations that obedience led to blessing but disobedience led to judgments.
6. At Mount Sinai God revealed himself as awesome and unapproachable to all except selected individuals performing specified procedures.
7. At Mount Sinai God revealed to Moses that he existed in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He told Moses that no-one could see him and live (Father), he met with Moses in the Tent of Meeting and spoke with him 'face to face' and Moses could see him (time travelling Jesus) and he at one time took some of his Spirit that was on Moses and placed it on the Israelite elders and they all prophesied (Holy Spirit).
8. God gave instructions to eliminate the tribes living in Canaan.
9. Judgments often included destruction of whole groups of people, men women and children.
10. However, individuals from those tribes could at all times join with Israel and the worship of God and so avoid being destroyed.
11. Scriptures refer to the many people from other nations who joined the Israelites and accepted allegiance to their God.

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12. God gave to Moses the ten commandments and other commandments that had to be obeyed if the nation and individuals were to be blessed.
13. Through Moses came the revelation that obedience brought blessings but disobedience brought curses upon the Israelite nation.
14. God often used individuals to guide nations towards his end goals.
15. When the Israelites destroyed Jericho they were told to protect just the one family of Rahab the harlot. She became part of the ancestry that led to Jesus.
16. God used the Babylonians to bring judgment on a rebellious Israel but preserved a small 'remnant' of Israelites and later restored them to their land.
17. God used prophets to bring messages to the Israelite nation and at Mount Carmel Elisha had all the prophets of Baal destroyed.
18. The Israelite nation were the fulfilment of promises given to Abraham, that his descendants would become a great nation and bless all nations, primarily through the Messiah (Jesus).
19. God's plans for humanity are spread out over centuries of step by step fulfilment.
20. He uses short term events to lead humanity towards pre-determined more distant destinations.
21. God revealed to Moses and other prophets that history would be guided towards a pivotal event in God's agenda for humanity, namely the coming of the Messiah.
22. God revealed himself through the Psalms and prophets as having a character that, in addition to his power and wisdom, included love, mercy, long suffering and forgiveness for all who repent of their wrong actions and of their rebellion against their Creator.

CONCLUSIONS about the character of God from examination of his actions during human history?

1. The Creator acts over long time scales suggesting he operates independently from time.
2. God's short term goals are part of long term agendas.
3. God considers his end goals justify the means used to achieve them.
4. Some short term goals appear to us to be harsh but in God's long term view they are justified.
5. God always provided a way for individuals to escape judgment by joining the Israelite nation and giving allegiance to their God.
6. The instructions given to Moses showed that God is unapproachable by humans unless they meet his requirements.
7. God describes himself as compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.
8. God also does not leave the guilty unpunished.
9. Overall, God is revealed as being in a category of his own described as Holy

God's character revealed through Jesus



The overall message given by Jesus can be summarised in his words to Nicodemus "**For God so loved** the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" John 3:16-17.

So, we may ask how the love of God relates to revelations about his character that are evident from creation and from his actions during human history?

NOTE: I elaborate on the following summarised points in other articles. For instance articles freely downloadable from the www.factandfaith.co.za webpage, including "Big Bang Christianity".

Summary of God's character revealed through Jesus

1. God loves his creation and mankind.
2. He has made a way for people to be rescued from the legal right that Satan has over their eternal destinies.
3. The events taking place in this life are stepping stones to long term destinies in eternity.
4. God uses events that sometimes seem harsh to us, because he knows that these events will produce fulfilment of end goals in his eternal plans.
5. Ultimately whatever fails to be part of God's long term agendas gets pushed aside. There is a Hell.
6. It is God who will decide on the eternal destiny of every person who has ever lived. It is Jesus Christ who will be the judge.
7. The words of Jesus are true, "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:6). This is true because he will be the judge and all who find mercy will know that he alone has the authority to forgive, because he alone gained that authority when he died for the sins of the world.
8. Judgment Day and the way that Jesus judges will demonstrate the truth of God's revealed character, namely that he is loving, merciful and just. This will especially be demonstrated through how he treats those who never heard the Gospel message and yet acted positively within the revelation of God available to them.
9. Hell was prepared for Satan and his rebellious angels. The words of Jesus make it clear that God does not want any of humanity to land up there. However, the scriptures indicate that some of humanity will inherit that destiny.
10. Since Jesus will be the judge it makes sense to understand more about how he will judge. We learn this from a study of his teachings, as recorded in the Bible.

6.

11. Overall, the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ demonstrate to us that his character includes love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, long suffering and justice.
12. Love and anger are closely related since it is right to hate whatever harms what we love. God is revealed as also having wrath and anger and meting out judgment.
13. Clearly it remains a 'fearful thing to become an object of God's wrath'.

How will Jesus judge?

In descriptions of Judgment Day we read of men and women being judged, **according to what they have done**. For instance Psalm 62:12, Matthew 25:31-46, Romans 2:6-16, Revelation 20:11-15 and in Daniel 7: 9-10 and 12:2-3 we read of 'books' that are opened.

In addition, Jesus made it very clear that he will judge justly. So what about those who acted in ignorance or those who were killed in Noah's flood or those killed during the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and others killed by natural disasters?

The words of Jesus make it clear that, in addition to us being judged by what we have done and said, this judgment will be within the context of what we knew we should have done and ignorance is a mitigating factor. For instance, Jesus said *"If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin"* (John 15:22).

Jesus said *"Woe to you Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you"* (Luke 10:13-15).

Jesus said, *" If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you"* (Matthew 11:23-24).

Amazingly, we are told by Jesus that the people of Sodom, who we are told were destroyed by God because of their evil behaviour, will receive more mercy at Judgment Day than some who seemed less evil and very 'religious'. This is because Jesus will judge their actions in the light of what they knew to be right and in the light of the knowledge of God available to them at the time.

Jesus said, *"Much is required from the person to whom much is given, much more is required from the person to whom much more is given"* (Luke 12:47). When Jesus was on the cross he said, *"Father forgive them for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34).

The reverse side of God's justice is revealed in passages such as, *" For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind"* Some Pharisees (religious people whom Jesus often accused of hypocrisy) who were with him,

7.

heard him say this and asked "what? Are we blind too?. Jesus said, " if you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains" (John 9:39-40).

Bible passages such as these tell us that each of us have two destinies as conscious beings. Firstly our mortal lives here on earth. Secondly, our eternal destiny. **Our mortal lives are NOT the end. This reality is the KEY to reconciling the love, mercy and justice of God with the apparently harsh events** that may overtake individuals , groups of people and even whole nations during our mortal lives.

If we only look at the events taking place in our life on earth then sometimes people seem justified in questioning the love, mercy and justice of God. However, in God's agendas these short term events within our mortality are only stepping stones into our final destinies. It is only at Judgment Day that God's true character will be revealed by how he judges and how he rewards.

At Judgment Day Jesus will judge us according to what we have done in life or have not done, but what we have done will be judged in the light of what we knew we should have done. At Judgment Day we will see the balances balanced, the wrongs avenged and many who seemed to have experienced no justice in life will receive abundant mercy and justice before the judgment throne of Jesus Christ.

In other words, God's short term agendas experienced during our mortal lives ,are stepping stones to God's long term agendas, namely our eternal destinies. It is only at Judgment Day and when experiencing the wonders of our eternal destiny that we will all understand how the events on earth fit into the overall reality that God is loving, merciful, slow to anger, just and forgiving.

When humanity stand before the Judgment seat of Jesus Christ the greatest question will be; what have you done with God's offer of forgiveness through the shed blood of Jesus on the cross? Those who have fully understood the Gospel message but have rejected it will be without excuse. They will be in a far worse condition than those who had never heard the Gospel message or had only heard it in one of the distorted presentations of the Gospel.

Those who respond positively to the Gospel message have already entered into an eternal life relationship with God. As Jesus said, *"I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).*

Supremely Jesus revealed to us that God desires relationship with his creatures and has planned that at least some can be 'saved', so as to inherit Eternal Life. However, we are also told that humanity is existing within a cosmic spiritual conflict, between God and Satan, between good and evil.

God's character revealed through early church writings



The early church actions and writings serve as another commentary on the character of God.

Descriptions of the early church in the book of Acts and the writings of Paul, expand on truths spoken about by Jesus.

Below is my attempt to summarise some of these teachings.

1. God is powerful, wise and outside of time.
2. He loves his creation and mankind so much that he made a way to rescue us from Satan via a costly plan, becoming a man and dying in the place of human sin and rebellion.
3. He has guided human history towards the incarnation when God became man in Jesus Christ.
4. His long term plans require short term actions that may seem harsh.
5. He has provided a way for people to escape the destiny determined for Satan and his rebellious angels.
6. There will be a final Day of Judgment.
7. How God judges will reveal his love, mercy and justice and grace.
8. There are two destinies possible for people, either in God's heaven or in Hell.
9. Those who stand in the way of God's plans get pushed aside.

His character revealed through personal human experiences of God

I have been most privileged to experience God's interaction with my life. Some of these 'God encounters' are described in my webpage article 'Personal journey of discovery'. We read of similar interactions in the Bible book of Acts.

It was an exciting revelation for me when I experienced truly miraculous timing of events during the bush war in Rhodesia and since then on a number of occasions. I realised that God was actually intervening in the events of just one human, namely myself. Since I could not deny this fact I realised that he must also be interacting with millions of people all over

the world at the same time. This realisation enabled me to better understand how the Creator can be aware of and be interacting with intimate details of his creation.

In other words God can and does guide events within our time dimensions and so the God who 'changes not' has guided the whole history of the universe and life on earth. He is a 'hands on' God!

The events recorded in the Bible book of Acts and in other places in the Bible reveal a God who guides individual human lives, especially those who have turned to him in repentance and faith. This does not mean an easy life and the life of Paul is one example. However, through all the challenges of life God guides. He uses events to train us and to guide us because he is training us for our final destiny in his eternal presence.

CONCLUSIONS about God's character as experienced in our personal lives

- 1 His love for individual people.
- 2 He starts guiding events of our lives before we personally respond to him.
- 3 Events in our lives sometimes seem harsh and sometimes impossible for us to understand, but often a bit later we see how meaningful they were and how he was guiding our lives towards his best plans for us.
- 4 We sometimes see his intervention in our lives through split second timing of events, resulting in situations that we recognise were supernatural.
- 5 At times in our lives when we were rebellious we experienced God's judgment, when he made life difficult for us. This was his 'tough love'.

Comparison of God's revealed characteristics; through creation, through history, through Jesus, through the early church and through personal experience.

There are no contradictions between revealed aspects of God's character, as seen in creation, human history, the life and teachings of Jesus and writings of the early Christian church.

My overall conclusion is that God has ordained a world that contains harsh events and death as a fundamental aspect of how life systems function. We also see that God's pre-determined end goals justify the means used to achieve them.

The way the world has been created to function sometimes result in death of many people. Some of these events were sanctioned by God in order to guide this universe and human history towards pre-ordained end-goals. Other events, such as earthquakes are an inevitable consequence of how the geology of earth operates.

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The key to reconciling God's revealed characteristics of love, mercy, compassion, forgiveness and justice with seemingly harsh events during creation and human history, is to accept that this mortal life is not the end and that **there is Judgment Day coming and Jesus will be the judge.**

Jesus has revealed how he will judge. It is based on what we have done or have not done, but this is judged in the light of what we knew we should have done.

All who have ever lived will then experience the justice of God and his characteristics of love, mercy forgiveness and justice will be fully revealed. The balances will be balanced and just judgment given.

It is only our acceptance of the reality of a just judge on Judgment Day that can enable us to reconcile the revealed character of God with some of the events where men, women and children were destroyed by natural disasters or by events such as the Israelite nation conquering Canaan in the days of Joshua.

Creation, human history and the early church writings reveal that God sidelines and sometimes destroys things that stand in the way of achieving his end goals. He created dinosaurs and then brought them to extinction in order to make the world suitable for other life forms and humanity. He destroyed Sodom and Gomorra and the corrupt tribes in Canaan, in order to lead Israel towards the goal of Calvary and the redemption plan for humanity.

God's character of love, mercy, forgiveness and justice has been revealed through his plan of 'salvation' when he became a man and died for the sins of the world. This Gospel message is the way he has provided to rescue mankind from the destiny proclaimed for all rebellion in the universe – namely separation from his intimate presence.



Many people in our generation are trying to place God in a box designed to their specifications of what they think he should be like. Unfortunately all the 'cards' are in his hands and one day all of us will be faced with the real God who has revealed himself through creation, history, Jesus, the early Christian church and personal experiences.

Each of us have to choose, either to accept and respond to God as he has revealed himself to be, or to create a God concept to our liking. In our generation many people are removing from the Bible references to Satan, Hell or God's judgments. However, if God is who he has revealed himself to be it makes good sense to think through the implications.

The really good news is that those who respond to God's way of reconciliation discover that this awesome Creator actually desires intimate relationship with us and he really does love us and wants the best for us. However, although we find it hard to understand, Jesus made it clear that there is a cosmic conflict in progress between God and Satan, between good and evil. God's plan through Jesus is to rescue us from the legal right that Satan has over us.

The legal right that Satan has over us derives from the revelation that God does not change and his laws remain constant. He has decreed that there is no place in the universe for rebellion. This makes sense since even science has revealed how the universe is held together by very precise forces. If relationships between these were changed by even a tiny fraction our universe could not exist. The universe requires only one ultimate authority.

God's judgment against Satan's rebellion is banishment from his intimate presence. That is why Hell was created 'for the devil and his angels'. They could not be destroyed because they were created in a way that they cannot die. They have to be confined to one locality and the Bible calls that reality Hell.

However, Satan can say that, in order for God to be consistent and unchanging, because humanity have rebelled they must suffer the same fate as God has pronounced for all rebellion, namely separation from his intimate presence. **We need to be saved from this reality.**

Right now we exist within this cosmic battle. The victory was won at Calvary and at the resurrection of Jesus but the inevitable confinement of Satan and his angels to Hell has not yet been done. That is why we see evil, wars and human cruelty all around us. Jesus said that Satan is a murderer and deceiver. One of his favoured deceptions is to persuade us that he does not exist. His other deceptions fuel the human cruelty that he enjoys to watch.

Whose side do we want to be on? I choose God's side even though I cannot understand a lot of things.

What an amazing reality God has planned for us creatures of dust and mortality, that we can have the opportunity to be part of his eternal plans. An even more amazing thing is that he actually loves humanity and desires a personal relationship with each of us!

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