

Introduction: Something Else Must Be Going On

I'll tell you all my ideas about Looking-glass House.
First, there's the room you can see through the
glass that's just the same as our drawing room,
only the things go the other way . . .
the books are something like our books,
only the words go the wrong way . . .
—Alice, *Through the Looking-Glass*

A Tale of My Strangely Behaving Wife

My wife, Shelley, is as kind, gentle, and compassionate a person as you'll ever meet. (She's obviously also exceptionally wise since she decided to marry *me* thirty-seven years ago!)

Having established these facts, I'd like you to imagine a story.¹

Suppose I am walking downtown one sunny day and I spot Shelley walking on the other side of a busy street. I shout her name and wave my hand in the air, but the noise of the heavy traffic drowns out my voice and the traffic makes it impossible to jaywalk across the street to greet her. I try to call her on my phone, but she apparently isn't carrying her phone or has it silenced. So I decide to keep pace with her until I arrive at the corner crosswalk.

As we both approach the intersection, I see Shelley come upon a

1. Pay attention to the details in this hypothetical story. They will become significant at various points in this book.

panhandler in a wheelchair. He appears to suffer from mental illness since he's muttering to himself and rocking back and forth while holding out his can for donations. His tattered baseball cap seems to be his most prized possession, for he clings to it as people pass by, apparently afraid that someone might try to steal it. Knowing how compassionate Shelley is, I anticipate that she'll probably put a five- or ten-dollar bill in this poor man's can and start up a conversation with him.

But suppose that, instead of showing compassion, my lovely wife suddenly screams at this man at the top of her lungs, knocks his donation can out of his hand, grabs his cap, kicks over his wheelchair, and takes off running down the street!

Obviously, witnessing this would horrify me. But without an opportunity to talk to my wife, how should I understand what I just witnessed?

I could consider the possibility that Shelley had a Jekyll-and-Hyde sort of split personality that she'd somehow kept hidden from me for thirty-seven years. But for me to question my wife's character after all our years together feels dishonoring to her and to our marriage. I *know* my wife, and I have to trust that, despite what I had just witnessed, she has the kind and compassionate character I've come to know and love over the years.

The only remaining alternative for me is to reinterpret the horrifying event I just witnessed in light of what I know about Shelley's true, compassionate character. Since the cruelty Shelley appeared to display cannot be true, I have to assume that *something else must be going on* that I am not aware of.

For example, maybe Shelley had volunteered to be part of a sociological experiment to test how people respond when witnessing a shocking assault. Or maybe Shelley and the panhandler had agreed to play roles for *Candid Camera*, or *Punk'd*, or some other reality TV show that pulls pranks on people. Indeed, I might suspect that I am the one being punk'd! Each of these ideas may seem pretty far-fetched, but they're far more plausible than the suggestion that my compassionate wife actually could be capable of engaging in such cruel behavior.

Further, the plausibility of each of these hypothetical scenarios could be increased or diminished by other considerations. For example, suppose that earlier in the day Shelley had insisted, without explanation, that I meet her downtown on that exact street and at that

exact time. This would increase the likelihood that I was the victim of a carefully orchestrated prank and decrease the likelihood that Shelley was part of a sociological experiment. If I had seen a mischievous look in Shelley's eye as she implored me to meet her at that time and place, the plausibility of the prank scenario would be increased even further and the experiment scenario even less. On the other hand, if I happened to be downtown on a whim and/or if I noticed several official-looking people taking notes in the area of the panhandler, the converse would be true.

Our Dilemma

The situation in which I found myself in the above story is somewhat like the predicament we Christians find ourselves in when we witness Yahweh seeming to act in cruel ways in the Old Testament (OT).² Christians have always affirmed that Jesus Christ, and especially Jesus Christ crucified, is the full and complete revelation of God.³ From him we learn that God's nature is love—the kind of self-sacrificial love that led God to become a human and to offer himself up for us when we were yet enemies.⁴

But what are we to think when we find Yahweh acting in surprisingly sub-Christlike ways in the OT? For example, what are we to make of God commanding the Israelites to mercilessly slaughter “anything that breathes” in certain areas within Canaan (e.g., Deut 20:16)? That command certainly doesn't seem to reflect self-sacrificial love!

One option that some people take is to simply reject passages that depict God in violent ways.⁵ This solves our dilemma, but it conflicts with the fact that Jesus repeatedly endorsed the OT as the inspired word of God.⁶ If we confess Jesus as Lord, I don't see how we can reserve for ourselves the right to correct his theology. I thus don't feel I'm free to simply reject anything I find in Scripture.

2. “Yahweh” is the primary name of God in the OT.

3. I will defend this claim in chapter 2.

4. 1 John 4:8; 1 John 3:16; Rom 5:10.

5. For example, E. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), and C. S. Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. S. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 13–44.

6. See, for example, Matt 15:4; 21:42; 22:29, 31; 26:54. On Jesus's high view of Scripture, see e.g. J. H. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

So we're in a tricky spot. We cannot deny that God sometimes appears violent and cruel in the OT. At the same time, just as it would be unfaithful for me to question the compassionate character of my wife after thirty-seven years of marriage, it seems unfaithful for us to question the altogether loving character of God that is revealed in the crucified Christ. In fact, we'll later see that the New Testament (NT) presents the crucified Christ not as one revelation among others, but as the revelation that culminates and supersedes all others. And this rules out allowing any OT portrait of God to compromise the beauty of the God who is revealed on the cross.

This leaves us with only one remaining possibility: If we believe that Jesus fully reveals what God is *really* like, we have no choice but to suspect that *something else must be going on* when God appears to act violently in the OT. And until we have the opportunity to sit down with God face-to-face, our job is to try to imagine what this *something else* might be.

In Lewis Carroll's 1871 sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*, titled *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice steps through her looking-glass (a mirror) into an alternate reality.⁷ There she finds that everything is reversed—the way things appear in a mirror. Similarly, we will later discover that, when we interpret the OT's violent portrayals of God while fully trusting that God's *true* character is revealed on the cross, the cross begins to function along the lines of Alice's looking-glass.

We shall see that this looking-glass cross allows us to see *what else is going on* in a way that completely reverses the violent dimension of these portraits. In fact, when interpreted through the looking-glass cross, the violence that OT authors sometimes ascribe to God no longer bears witness to a violent God; it rather bears witness to the self-sacrificial, nonviolent God who was supremely revealed on the cross.

7. L. Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (New York: Dover, 1999 [1871]).