

DOES GOD CHANGE?

Exodus 3:14, John 8:58

By Raymond White

Yes, I know, there is this verse —

Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.

And we surmise from that verse that God never changes. We have even invented words to describe that aspect of God's nature, words like "immutable" which is a fancy way of saying God is sort of atomic in his nature and therefore can't be changed and can't even be influenced. But there is also this verse —

Hebrews 5:2 Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity.

Which is to say that Jesus has compassion on us because he has shared our infirmities, our life problems. In other words, he understands us because he became human and lived life as we do.

So, Jesus never changes? That's impossible. Living here with us changed him, gave him compassion. Life changed him, to our benefit.

If you insist, you might be able to have it both ways by arguing that the "in-time" Christ changes from experience to experience while the "out-of-time" Christ exists as an absolute, encapsulating all of his "through-time" experiences together as an eternal singularity of being. That way he can be both changing and not-changing.

Well, maybe. But that's pretty cerebral. Personally, I'm pretty happy living in the real world of time and sharing it with a real God, one who is less "immutable".

[1] THE CHANGING GOD

But that was Jesus. What about God? Of course if you believe that Jesus *is* God then my point is already made. But still, to not skate over the issue, the God of the Bible changes his mind, and often. And when he changes his mind, that's change.

Genesis 6:6 And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth...

Exodus 32:14 And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do...

Judges 2:18 ...it repented the LORD because of their groaning...

1 Samuel 15:35 The LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel.

2 Samuel 24:16 ...the LORD repented him of the evil...

Jeremiah 18:8 ...I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.

Amos 7:3 The Lord repented for this, it shall not be, saith the LORD.

Jonah 3:10 ...God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do ...

It's pretty clear that God changes his mind because he says so. But then, what are we to do with this verse?

1 Samuel 15:29 ...he is not a man, that he should repent...

God changes his mind a lot and then he denies it. How can that be? There may be one middle ground, and that is this —

Psalms 110:4 The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent...

If God never changes his mind, that why would he ever need to take an oath? The point of an oath is that people, and God, *do* change their mind, but an oath binds us so that even if we change our mind, we must still perform our commitment.

So, when God takes an oath, he may change his mind but he cannot change his behavior because his oath binds him. But if he does not take an oath, then all bets are off. If there is no possibility that God could change his mind and act differently, then what could an oath possibly mean? An oath means one thing: guaranteed performance in spite of a change of mind. And that is how God sees it too.

Acts 2:20 Therefore being a prophet [David], and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on the throne. [This is the Davidic covenant]

Hebrews 6:13 For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself. :16 For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. :17 Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath. :18 That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie.

So without those two immutable things (promise and oath), then God can change his mind and change his behavior.

I'm not challenging God's integrity, I'm simply establishing that God changes.

Now, some of you will be very nervous about that, because maybe if God changes, how can we be certain that he will live up to his promises? Maybe today's kind God won't be so kind in the future. Actually, we already know that today's kind God won't be so kind in the future, and you'd know that if you've ever read Revelation.

But I'm less interested in the kind or unkind God of the future, I am more interested in the unkind God of the past. That God — (who brought the flood, destroyed Sodom, and ordered Joshua to kill babies) — changes, and I am glad that he does.

Not only does God change, but he changes his mind about changing his mind!

1 Samuel 15:11 It repented me that I have set up Saul to be king ...

1 Samuel 15:29 ... for he [God] is not a man that he should repent.

1 Samuel 15:35 ... the LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel.

These three verses catch God in a flip-flop. He repents, then won't repent, then repents anyway. God is struggling with himself. Like us, he has cognitive dissonance — two beliefs that are in conflict with each other. Clearly, it is God's nature to change.

[2] GOD'S NAME: OLD TESTAMENT

Exodus 3:12 And he said, Certainly I will be with thee. :14 And God said unto Moses, I AM that I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.

The Hebrew words “ehyeh asher ehyeh” are translated in :14 as “I am that I am,” the complete tense. But “I am” is incorrect. “Ehyeh” is correctly translated in :12, “I will be” the incomplete tense. “Ehyeh” is also correctly translated —

Exodus 4:12 ...I will be with thy mouth...

So in 3:14 God's true name is closer to “I will be what I will be,” or “I am becoming what I am becoming”. And that reveals to us that God is in the process of becoming what he is becoming.

But that invites this question: Just what is he becoming? The verse finishes with “I AM hath sent me unto you.” In other words, “I am becoming your deliverance.” In other words, “You cannot fail, Moses, because their deliverance is assured because that is what I am becoming.” What God is becoming is irretractably intertwined with the fate and destiny of Israel and of the world.

God's name is “I am becoming what I am becoming.” And what he is becoming is in Moses, and in the words he will speak, and in their deliverance. That is what God is, the God that is becoming.

When you see how very bound up we are with the nature of God, it is a heavy responsibility for us to be what God wants us to be because what we are is his becoming.

Now, consider all that and consider God's changing, from the very vicious God of Noah and Joshua to the very kind God of Jesus. God changes because the human race changes from generation to generation. Here is another perspective —

Psalms 18:26 With the pure thou wilt shew thyself pure; and with the forward thou wilt shew thyself forward.

God's nature then takes on the characteristics of the people he reveals himself to. That makes him sort of like a mirror, reflecting back to us what we are. For example —

Genesis 6:13 And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.

God is saying, “You want violence? I'll show you violence. I'll kill all of you!” God became what they were. God became vicious because mankind was vicious.

Voltaire said, “God created man in his image and man returned the favor.” He said that to ridicule of course and we Christians don't like him for it. But sometimes what is cruelly said is closer to the truth than flattery, and Voltaire was close to the truth. God is an image of ourselves, not because we invented him (as Voltaire implied) but because he invented us, and created us in him image. We are his image and therefore he is ours.

Genesis 1:26 And God said, Let us make man in our image...

Well then, guess what. We change! And therefore God does too, for we and he are inseparably joined. And I for one am very glad that he does change. I am much happier with the God of Calvary than I ever could have been with the God of Sinai.

But is this possible? We change because God causes us to change, yet God changes because we cause him to change. Does such a divine do-sa-do even make sense?

Does it make sense is not the right question. Is it true is the right question. There are many things in this universe that do not make sense (to us) and yet are true. Quantum mechanics still gives us fits and probably always will. There are experiments that behave a certain way until they are observed — and when they are observed, they behave another way. That makes no sense, but it is true. And then there are entangled particles. If you change the path of one particle, the path of the other changes as well. How does that happen? We don't know, but it does.

Maybe God and man are like that — entangled with each other in some way like symbiant creatures each affecting the other. Certainly we affect God. We make him happy or sad or angry, and if we affect his mood, clearly we affect his behavior — and if we change, he changes. We are entangled.

[3] GOD'S NAME: NEW TESTAMENT

But Hebrew was not the only ancient language of the Bible. Following Hebrew, there was, of course, Greek, the language of the New Testament. Here is a fair question: Does the name of God ever appear in the New Testament? In fact, it does.

John 8:58 Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. :59 Then took they up stones, to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself...

That Jesus was applying the sacred name of God to himself is clear to us from the text. But more, it was clear to them, that's why they picked up stones to stone him.

But to the point: what does "I am" mean? That is, what does it mean in the Greek?

The Greek reads "prin abraam genesthai ego eimi." Literally, "Before Abraham existed, I am." The "ego eimi" is present tense, "I am," not perfect tense, "I have been" or "aemane." So "I am" appears to be the correct translation of "ego eimi."

However, there are places in the New Testament where the present tense is, and should be, translated to the perfect tense. For example —

John 14:9 Jesus saith unto him, Have I been [Gr: ego eimi] so long with you...

So even though the Greek is literally, "Am I so long with you?" its meaning is clearly, "Have I been so long with you?"

Taking our cue from that literary tweek, let's return to *John 8:58*. When Jesus said "I am" did he really mean "I have been"? And if so, what does *that* mean?

I am suggesting to you that Jesus did indeed mean "I have been." And why would that be so? For the same reason that *14:9* is best translated "Have I been with you"

because “I am with you” makes no literal sense in the context. And neither does “Before Abraham was, I am.” What does make sense is “Before Abraham was, I was.”

One might argue against me this way: “But God told Moses ‘I am that I am’ and that makes no grammatical sense, but that’s okay because ‘I am’ is a proper name.” The problem with that argument is that “I am” is incorrect. Correct is “I will be” which makes perfect grammatical sense. So when Jesus applied that text to himself in John, we ought to expect his words in John to also make grammatical sense; that is, “Before Abraham was, I was” which the Greek allows. Now, what would that mean?

Think of this in both directions. God tells Moses, “I am becoming what I am becoming.” Then Jesus applying that name to himself says, “Before Abraham was, I have been.” Therefore we see God with Moses seeing himself in the future, and then God as Christ 2,000 years later seeing himself in the past. First, I am becoming, then later, I have been, or even better, I have become!

Now, think about this —

***John 8:56** Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.*

Abraham saw the future, saw God in that future, and saw what God would become. And that made Abraham glad. Why? Because the world that Abraham knew was pretty grim, and God hadn’t improved it much. But he would improve the world because he was changing. There was a lot for Abraham to be glad about.

And that brings us to the future; not Abraham’s future but our own.

[4] THE FUTURE

Let’s run this out and see ourselves in the far future.

***Romans 8:16** The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God. :17 And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ...*

***Revelation 21:7** He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.*

“All things” is a lot. To be a child of God, an heir of God is vast; actually, it’s beyond vast. It means to be like God, to do what he does, to create.

Now that’s daunting. You might shrink from the task of creating when you realize that you will be what you will be; in other words, you will be what you create.

Okay. So now you know what God’s name is and what it means. In your far future, what will your name be? There is an answer —

***Revelation 2:17** ...To him that overcometh will I give...him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that received it.*

What is your new name? To find that out, you’ll have to get to the future.