

GODLY RATIONAL ACTORS

A Devotional Meditation on Vayishlach (And He Sent)

Genesis 32:3-36:43; Obadiah 1; Proverbs 25:4-5;

Matthew 26:52-55; Luke 14:31-33, 22:36-37; Romans 12:14-21; Galatians 1:6-10

Albert J. McCarn

December 2, 2023

My understanding of politics and international affairs has developed through half a century of study and experience. My approach to the subject can be summarized in three famous quotes. The first is from Otto von Bismark, the man who presided over the establishment of the German Empire in the 19th century. It was he who explained that “Politics is the art of the possible.”

The second quote is by Theodore Roosevelt, the man who guided the transformation of the United States into a global power in the early 20th century. His approach to foreign policy was, “Walk softly and carry a big stick.”

The third quote is attributed to humorist and actor Will Rogers, whose political comments in the years after World War I poked fun at all parties. There is hard truth beneath the humor of his words, “Diplomacy is the art of saying, ‘Nice doggie,’ until you can find a rock.”

These statements by men wise in the ways of the world speak to how people and nations should conduct themselves in a civilized world. “Civilized” means a world of rational actors who abide by a universal code of ethical conduct – even if they honor that code only in the breach. It’s different in an “uncivilized” world filled with violence and baseless hatred, where domination and deception are the rule. There are always such people among us, identifiable by their blatant disregard for life, but until now, at least, the world has operated according to accepted principles that regulate interaction even among enemies. Whatever their goals, rational actors pursue them through shrewd calculation, peaceful coexistence and cooperation when possible, accommodation and appeasement when necessary and appropriate, and use of force in the correct measure when peaceful means are exhausted.

These are principles stated in God’s word, as in this comment on shrewd calculation by Messiah Yeshua:

Or what king, going to make war against another king, won’t first sit down to consider whether he is able with ten thousand to confront the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If not, while the other is still far away, he sends an ambassador and asks for peace. So in the same way, whoever does not renounce all that he has, cannot be My disciple.

Luke 14:31-33 TLV



Theodore Roosevelt and his Big Stick in the Caribbean.
William Allen Rogers, 1904, [via Wikimedia Commons](#).

This seems straightforward, but what do we do with seemingly contradictory statements in scripture? For example, just before His arrest, Yeshua advised His disciples to sell their cloaks and buy swords, but then at His arrest, He commanded the one man who drew his sword to put it away, saying, "For all who take up the sword shall perish by the sword." (Luke 22:36-37; Matthew 26:52).

Then there's Paul, who in one passage says we should live at peace with all people as much as possible, and in another pronounces a curse on anyone who teaches a gospel different than what he taught (Romans 12:14-21; Galatians 1:6-10). And what about Solomon, who gives contradictory advice in the same chapter:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, else you also will be like him.

Answer a fool according to his folly, else he will be wise in his own eyes.

Proverbs 26:4-5 TLV

How are we expected to follow God's rules when His book doesn't make sense? Where is the consistency? Why does He make it so hard to live righteously, and allow us to fall so easily into error? And then, once we've fallen, why is He so quick to punish us? It all seems so bewildering and unfair.

I imagine this is how people end up walking away from relationship with our Creator. They see these contradictions, both in the Word of God and in the people of God, and they ask the hard questions. That is the right thing to do, but too often the questioners don't stick around for the answers, or they don't like the answers and walk away in disgust.

So, what are the answers? We learn them by studying the biblical records of our ancestors. In brief, the general answer is, "It depends on the circumstances."

Does that mean our Creator really doesn't have objective standards, and that we're supposed to conduct our lives according to situational ethics? Not at all. He does have objective standards of truth and righteousness, and He gives us principles to follow. He also gives us brains to think and hearts to pray so that we can ask His counsel as we muddle through the messy circumstances of life in a broken world.

That's what Jacob did. He was definitely a shrewd character, as we see in the ways he navigated the hostile environment of working for his father-in-law Laban. It seems he preferred avoiding conflict whenever possible, which is why he chose not to initiate a confrontation with Laban when his situation became intolerable, but instead made a plan with his wives to leave quietly and return to his father Isaac. When the inevitable confrontation did happen, it was on neutral ground of Jacob's choosing, where neither man had the advantage, and where God intervened on Jacob's behalf.

The same happened when Jacob faced his brother Esau. He could not flee and return to Laban, and he could not avoid Esau with his band of 400 armed men, so Jacob opted for appeasement. That's why he gave up a hefty portion of his livestock as a present to Esau. At the same time, Jacob made some tactical preparations by dividing his household into two camps. I'm sure his older sons and his male servants were well armed and trained in combat, but their strength would have been inadequate against the force Esau brought to bear. Therefore, Jacob's preparations were not for battle, but for preservation of as much of the family as possible should there be no peaceful outcome.

These are the preparations any person wise in the ways of the world would have made. Jacob, however, as a righteous man of God, went one step further: he spent all night in prayer, saying –

O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, *ADONAI*, who said to me, “Return to your land and to your relatives and I will do good with you.” I am unworthy of all the proofs of mercy and of all the dependability that you have shown to your servant. For with only my staff I crossed over this Jordan, and now I’ve become two camps. Deliver me, please, from my brother’s hand, from Esau’s hand, for I’m afraid of him that he’ll come and strike me—the mothers with the children. You Yourself said, “I will most certainly do good with you, and will make your seed like the sand of the sea that cannot be counted because of its abundance.”

Genesis 32:10-13 TLV

This is the difference between worldly wise people and true people of God. They often use the same means, but God’s people include Him in their calculations. That’s why God not only watched over the reunion of the two estranged brothers, but also assured Jacob of his place in God’s plans for the world by giving him the name Israel.

Israel would go on to navigate with difficulty life among the heathen Canaanites, sometimes with appeasement, sometimes with good business arrangements, and sometimes with armed confrontation. He and his household made many mistakes, and at times acted no differently than the wicked people of the land. However, even with their errors, they eventually remembered who they were, and Whose they were. That’s what distinguishes the rational actors of God’s people from the pretenders of the world.