

The God of the Old Testament vs. the God of the New Testament

Influential thinkers such as Eric Seibert, Peter Enns, and Greg Boyd have given the impression that there is a wide chasm between representations of God in the Old Testament and the God Jesus perfectly reveals in the New—a God who is non-violent and loving. If someone issues commands to drive out the Canaanites or to engage in other forms of coercive force, this must be Moses or Joshua doing so because of their fallen, violence-prone, ancient Near Eastern cultural conditioning (the “textual” God rather than the “actual” non-violent, enemy-loving God). This talk will argue that “the kindness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22) are manifested in both testaments and that, despite discontinuities, important continuities also exist.

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1. Introduction

a. Marcion (b. ca. 100): rejected the OT and its “lesser” wrathful Creator God; formed an anti-Judaistic canon—a revised Luke (*Euangelikon*) and 10 of Paul’s letters (*Apostolikon*). Are the OT’s warfare, judgments, harsh psalms, physical punishments (cp. Dt. 11:10–17; 28:12, 23–24; Am. 7:1–3) opposed to the “enemy-loving, nonviolent Jesus”?

b. Three influential scholars:

Peter Enns: “The [NT] leaves behind the violent, tribal, insider-outsider, rhetoric of a significant portion of the [OT]. Instead, the character of the people of God—now made up of Jew and Gentile—is dominated by such behaviors as faith in Christ working itself out in love, self-sacrifice, praying for one’s enemies and persecutors. You know, Jesus 101...the Old and New Testaments... give us, rather, different portrayals of God.”

Greg Boyd: Any acts involving coercive force (“violence”) in the OT cannot actually be divinely commanded (“thus says the Lord”) but this is the result of culturally-conditioned, fallen, sinful, violence-prone “prophets” (“thus says Moses/Joshua”). Jesus on the cross reveals the true “cruciform” character of God. God doesn’t directly punish or bring harm; he withdraws and demonic/human agents do their worst.

Eric Seibert: “To put it bluntly: **not everything in the “good book” is either good, or good for us.** I realize this may sound blasphemous to some people and flies in the face of everything they have been taught to believe about the Bible. When the Church grandly proclaims the Bible to be the Word of God, it gives the impression that the words of Scripture are above critique and beyond reproach. We are taught to read, revere, and embrace the Bible. We are *not* taught to challenge its values, ethics, or portrayals of God.” The true (“actual”) God isn’t behind violence—only the “textual God” (a literary representation). Seibert: (1) *Violence*: Seibert defines it as “*physical, emotional, or psychological harm done to a person by an individual (or individuals), institution, or structure that results in injury, oppression, or death.*” (2) “*Virtuous violence*” has been used to justify colonialism, ethnic hatred, abusing women: “The

Old Testament *itself* is part of the problem.” It absorbs much of the biblical writers’ own ancient Near Eastern [ANE] values/beliefs (ethnocentrism, patriarchy, divine judgments). (3) The OT makes assumptions about God that “people of faith today should no longer accept” (like helping a nation win or causing it to lose; this just depends on troop size, sophisticated and more powerful weapons, etc.). So we should *read* the OT carefully, conversantly, critically—not compliantly (57); *challenge* the OT at various points (Would I like my land invaded by Israelites? Didn’t Goliath’s family love him?); and *name* the violence (e.g., killing Canaanites = “genocide”).

2. This “harsh”/“violent” OT God vs. the NT “loving Father” is not accurate.

a. We *should* think more deeply about difficult, ethically-troubling Old Testament passages rather than gloss over them—and plenty of biblical scholars do—and we should point out abuses of Scripture.

b. Bible-reading Christians in Western civilization and Western (especially Protestant) missionaries have helped bring many democratizing gains, moral reforms, and protection of indigenous peoples from colonial powers.

c. Seibert’s negative comment that the church “grandly proclaims” the Bible to be God’s Word is rather unfair.

d. We must be careful not to appeal to Jesus’s authority selectively.

e. We must not ignore other NT affirmations of God as a severe judge (cf. Heb. 12:15-25).

f. Jesus and NT writers don’t actually read the OT “in a nonviolent way.”

g. “Behold then the kindness and the severity of God” (Rom. 11:22 NASB). Yes, God is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (Exod. 34:6), but he will “by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (v. 7).

h. There are differences in God’s dealings with his people under both covenants:

1) **Capital punishment is commanded in OT—in contrast to church discipline for God’s people in the NT for, say, adultery [1 Cor. 5]).**

2) **God permits inferior moral conditions in the OT like patriarchy and warfare;** Mt 19:8: God meets people partway between the *ideal* and *fallen reality*. N.T. Wright compares the law to a booster rocket: “The Torah is given for a specific period of time, and is then set aside—not because it was a bad thing now happily abolished, but because it was a good thing whose purpose had now been accomplished” (*The Climax of the Covenant* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 181).

3) **The law is also dynamic and developing, with adjustments being made along the way.**

4) **“Covenant love” and “mercy” occur more commonly in the OT than the NT.**

5) **We see both greater love (in the cross) and more severe judgment in the NT.**

Further Reading:

Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster?* and (with Matthew Flannagan) *Did God Really Command Genocide?* (both by Baker Books).

Goldingay, John. *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.

Lamb, David. *God Behaving Badly*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010.