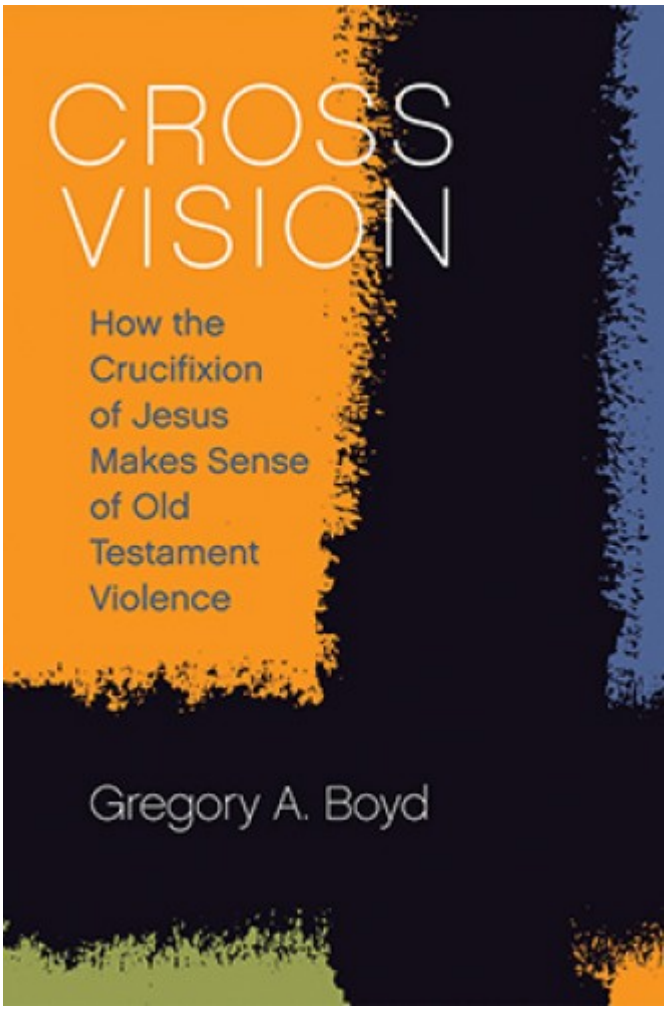
Are Greg Boyd and I reading the same Old Testament?

Yes, there’s violence. But there’s also God’s faithfulness and care.

by Collin Cornell in the November 8, 2017 issue

In Review



Cross Vision

How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence

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Fortress

"All my life I've tried to believe God was as beautiful as Jesus reveals him to be . . . but I never could *fully* give my heart to him. I love the God who gave everything for us while we were yet enemies, but I can't love the God who ever demanded that people mercilessly massacre untold numbers of innocent babies."

So a woman confessed to Greg Boyd after one of his sermons. She was in her midsixties, confiding a spiritual struggle of decades. Tearfully she told him that "today you helped me see that I don't need to believe God ever ordered babies to be massacred! I can finally let myself believe God really is as beautiful as the cross reveals him to be! I can finally trust God with my entire heart!"

Boyd cherishes this story. He writes that for him nothing compares to "seeing someone like this woman set free from lingering suspicions about God in order to fully embrace the beautiful loving God who is fully revealed on Calvary." Although the anecdote appears in the postscript of Boyd's latest book, in many ways it epitomizes the book's theological program. *Cross Vision* takes its departure from Old Testament violence—the problem its subtitle sets forth, and which had for so long taxed the trust of the woman in Boyd's story. *Cross Vision* addresses this problem with the crucifixion of Jesus—as a cipher and a source of spiritual relief. Boyd hopes his book elicits from its readers the same breakthrough of trust in God that the woman experienced.

Boyd's concern is pastoral—but his project is not for that reason intellectually thin. *Cross Vision* is a popular condensation of Boyd's nearly 1,500-page, two-volume work published earlier this year and titled *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*. Both books follow a very similar layout. Their first section defends the supremacy of Jesus Christ as the revelation of God. Their next section inventories the "dark side of the Bible," detailing numerous Old Testament texts that present an un-Christlike picture of God and proposing a grand theological explanation for how this can be and to what spiritual purpose. This section in both books contains the heart of Boyd's constructive thesis. Remaining sections propose further, subsidiary strategies for reclaiming the Old Testament. Boyd's project raises several issues for Christian theology, but perhaps none more profound than this: the truthfulness of the two testaments of the Christian Bible vis-à-vis the living God.

The story of the woman's tearful declaration illustrates that Boyd loves the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6), and he jealously defends it as the supreme revelation of God. Boyd raises Michael Ramsey's quote, and means it programmatically: "God is Christlike, and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all." For Boyd, Christ—and especially Christ crucified—is the definitive word of God: there is no god behind the God made known in Christ. Boyd's debt to Karl Barth is apparent. He names Jürgen Moltmann as the closest forebear to his project, and his two-volume work frequently footnotes Barth's subtle East German successor, Eberhard Jüngel. But Boyd's Christocentrism is hybrid: influenced by Barth and his aftercomers, it also bears the impress of Boyd's Anabaptism. The Christlikeness that characterizes God is, according to Boyd, one marked specifically by nonviolence, enemy love, and noncoercion. Boyd sees his own work as joining a distinctively Anabaptist hermeneutical tradition—one forged in persecution and martyrdom in the 16th century.

Boyd's vision is spiritually earnest and his program commendably Christ-centered. But his approach also holds prodigious implications for the theological truthfulness of scripture. Boyd's proposal is nothing if not an example of *Sachkritik*, an old German theological term meaning "criticism according to content." In a previous theological generation it was the most controversial of the criticisms applied to the Bible, because it cuts right to the heart: *Sachkritik* pivots on the notion that scripture is not wrong just in chronological detail or historical incident, but wrong theologically—bent awry from telling truthfully about the living God. If historical criticism targets the Bible's historical inaccuracies, *Sachkritik* targets its failings to represent God faithfully. The latter is what Boyd undertakes, and on no small scale. In a word, he charges an entire testament of the Christian Bible with pervasive theological deficiency—the Old Testament.

Boyd's criterion for measuring the Old Testament's theological deficiency is, of course, Jesus Christ. Christ is the exact representation of God and reveals God's own being as nonviolent, enemy-loving, and noncoercive. In comparison with this supreme revelation, all previous revelations are but "glimpses of truth"—Boyd's preferred translation of Hebrews 1:1, the opening verse of his preferred biblical book (in J. B. Phillips's paraphrase): "God gave our forefathers many different glimpses of the truth in the words of the prophets." Of these glimpses, Boyd writes, "if you're outside on a day when you can only catch glimpses of the sun, it means it's a mostly cloudy day. So, as we read the OT, we should remain aware that these authors had a

rather cloudy vision of God." To exalt the beauty of Jesus Christ and to detox the imagination of his Christian readership, Boyd gives the bulk of his book over to comparing Old Testament texts with the nonviolence and enemy love of Jesus Christ. He finds these Old Testament texts severely wanting, theologically: thickly beclouded with human fallenness, violence, and tribalism.

Boyd vouches some positive theological value to the Old Testament passages that he subjects to theological criticism; he maintains their *God-breathedness* (2 Tim. 3:16) in spite of their theological errancy. This is Boyd's grand theological explanation. He reasons from Jesus Christ: Christ was humble and nonviolent. Christ allowed human actors to think what they would of him and to aggress against him rather than to call down a legion of angels in self-defense. He identified with sinners and made his grave with the wicked. And if God truly always operates in the world as Jesus did, then God's manner of interacting with Israel bore the same cruciform shape. God humbly allowed human actors to project upon the divine self what they would, rather than forcefully to assert the truth. God appeared to identify with the sinful actions of God's human partners, even to become complicit in them. Hence Boyd recommends that we see Old Testament texts that present God as violent or authoritarian as "literary crucifixes"—products of the same divine condescension that Christ embodied in his passion and resulting from the same divine silence that Christ observed in the face of false accusations.

Such texts are God-breathed in that God self-reveals through them just as God does in Christ—having "no form nor comeliness" on the surface but disclosing divine glory to those whose eyes of faith can penetrate beneath. God's glory consists in the dramatic condescension that permitted ancient Israelites to write false and ugly things about God. Only very occasionally does Boyd claim that what is written in the Old Testament itself points faithfully to the character of God—for example, the Genesis 1 creation account, or Isaiah's vision of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, or Micah's prophecy of beating swords into plowshares.

Boyd looks for a way to salvage texts he thinks are theologically deficient.

To this charge of theological error on a nearly testamental scale, my first objection is simply this: I have found the God of the Old Testament stunning—beautiful and worthy of worship—and not just in the handful of passages that Boyd approves. I got into studying the Old Testament by reading a mentor's paper on the golden calf story. In that debacle of human idolatry at the very moment of covenant making, in

God’s rage and Moses’s intercession, in God’s final, precipitous new commitment to stay loyal to God’s people—I met a God I recognized: the one who absorbed the anguish of ultimate rejection and then, three days later, moved toward impossible new loyalty yet stronger than death. More than that, I felt I understood more deeply the tempestuous drama of divine long-suffering and human recidivism at the core of the Christian confession. The same held true for other texts of this older testament: far from being false and sub-Christian, I perceived in them a vast, continental theological consonance with the God made known in Jesus Christ.

This is not to shrug off the troubling theology or ethics of the Old Testament. But it is to contend that the Old Testament holds more (and much more) than just such troubles. This is more than Boyd seems to grant. When he brings up Deuteronomy, it is only as a purveyor of genocide. Leviticus is a list of capital offenses. Numbers is a theological fossil preserving the archaic belief that God enjoys the smell of burnt offerings. These claims are not wholly wrong so much as drastically reductive. Deuteronomy is a sustained meditation on God’s grace and the joy of grateful human life. Leviticus and the priestly writings are, in the words of Jewish Theological Seminary professor Benjamin Sommer, “the most Christian section of Hebrew Scripture” in view of their preoccupation with God’s initiative to overcome sin and dwell among humans. Numbers is the book of spiritual journeying par excellence. Boyd omits all of this because he treats these books and the Old Testament at large as an almost unrelenting train of horrors—a massacre of babes, as in the woman’s summary.

Besides the fact that this view of the Old Testament does not comport with my own reading experience—nor that of many Christians in many generations—it may also yield unsettling results for a Christian theology of Judaism. Boyd considers all of God’s instruction given to Israel on Sinai and gathered up in the Pentateuch as a sprawling instance of divine condescension: “the law-oriented portrait of God, which constitutes a foundational aspect of the OT, is a divine accommodation”—and so a product of human projection that God did not in fact do or reveal. Boyd radicalizes, as it were, Paul’s claim that the law was “ordained by angels” (Gal. 3:19) and ascribes it in effect to those “a little lower than angels.” So, too, does Boyd humanize “all depictions of Yahweh as uniquely belonging to Israel.” For him such depictions are theological falsities, which God with Christlike humility deigned to tolerate.

It would appear that Boyd thus denies two of the basic coordinates of Jewish self-understanding: that the entire Torah is from heaven and that the family of Israel is God's uniquely chosen people. Perhaps just as fundamental is the direction of Boyd's remarks concerning the divine name. Central to the Old Testament is God's revelation of a personal name to Moses from the burning bush—the name YHWH (Exod. 3:15). Out of respect for the holiness of this name, Jews have refused to pronounce it for thousands of years, instead substituting *HaShem*, "The Name." Boyd's treatment of the divine name would suggest that he understands it solely as a human artifact. There is a tendency throughout *Cross Vision* to associate the name YHWH with warlikeness and nationalism and to use the more generic "God" when referring the divine person's true, nonviolent character. Boyd's postscript, which offers words of spiritual encouragement to his readers, features the four-lettered divine name not at all. Boyd may not intend so, but the impression given is that God humbly allowed Israel to appoint a divine name, just like any ancient people named their patron deity—rather than that God truly self-identified by that name "to all generations" (Exod. 3:15).

After such negations, it is unclear what knowledge of God Boyd reserves to Judaism—a "cloudy vision" at best, and a mislaid reverence toward a misnomer for the actually nameless God. Boyd is alert to the problem; the final appendix of his two-volume work defends his approach against the accusation of supersessionism. But Boyd seems to understand the term narrowly: he condemns the idea that Jews are under God's wrath and he renounces replacement theology. What he does not comment on is the extent to which Judaism knows God—or does not. Could it be that in Boyd's view, Judaism knows God only slightly, since it treasures a testament so saturated with theological untruth?

If Boyd does apportion only slight knowledge of God to Judaism, that would pose grave ecumenical difficulties. But it would also pose difficulties closer to home—spiritual difficulties. Boyd means for his book to cleanse the theologically polluted imagination of Christian readers and to catalyze a breakthrough of trust in God. But trusting in God means trusting in God's faithfulness to abide by God's promises. And Boyd has placed a large question mark—if not a strikethrough—over God's promises to Israel. Boyd's regimen of *Sachkritik* systematically doubts the veracity of the Old Testament vis-à-vis the character of God. This makes it nearly impossible to utter an "Amen" to all God's past promises that are "Yes" in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). For Boyd, Christ does not so much fulfill God's promises and

match God's character, known already from Israel's scriptures, as reveal a previously unknown (or half-unknown) God.

In distinct voices, both testaments point to the same living God.

Boyd's proposal also casts a shadow over God's faithfulness to New Testament promises. The fires of theological criticism, once kindled, will hardly stay contained to one testament. Boyd realizes this. He writes: "Since we are dependent on the NT for our knowledge of God's definitive revelation in the crucified Christ . . . one [might] question how we can be assured that God did not have to accommodate aspects of the NT authors' fallen and culturally conditioned worldview." In fact Boyd admits in principle that God could have made such accommodations: perhaps the New Testament, too, falls into theological error, which God endures with Christlike silence. But Boyd does not in actuality think that this occurred, and he apologizes vigorously for New Testament texts that appear to promote chauvinism or violence.

These defenses have a rearguard, ad hoc quality. I say, what's good for the goose is good for the gander: theological criticism cannot be set loose on one testament and muzzled for the other. Rather we must acknowledge that in whatever ways the Old Testament is caught up in human fallenness and cultural specificity, the New Testament is also. At the same time, I would urge that both testaments are trustworthy in that which counts the most: each in its own distinctive voice testifies to the same living God. True, the New Testament preaches Christ by name while the Old does not. But the Old knows God no less—and is no less capable of nurturing trust and spiritual vitality. I, too, like the woman of Boyd's story, "love the God who gave everything for us while we were yet enemies." I also confess that this God, the crucified Jesus, is the LORD—"YHWH merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (Exod. 34:6 KJV).

The glory of the one God shines forth through these earthen vessels, the two testaments of the Christian Bible. Both together provide a rich lexicon for evoking God—and the life lived before God. As such, the particular events and institutions and persons that these writings describe silhouette far more enduring truth than that to which their simple, historical sense refers. In traditional Jewish and Christian understanding, for example, the details of human lovemaking in the Song of Songs radiate with perennial spiritual truth about the love between God and Israel, or Christ and the church. Psalms about David's kingship betoken a reality much grander than the memory of a defunct dynasty. God's gift of manna to one

generation of Israel in the wilderness offers instruction in the ways of God with all generations. “I can’t love the God who ever demanded massacre,” the woman in Boyd’s story said. But if God’s faithfulness authorizes the treatment of these other, particular texts as promissory, then the same may hold for violent passages; even texts about divine aggression could then signify something enduringly true about God and life before God.

Such an approach would not bypass the difficult plain sense, but would look expectantly through it and beyond it. Here, too, the history of interpretation furnishes precedents. As the Israelites traveled out of Egypt and toward Canaan, the Amalekites accosted them, and YHWH swore to make war against Amalek forever (Exod. 17). Jewish tradition saw in this seemingly very local occurrence the outline of a far larger and more persistent conflict. Amalek became an archetype for evil, such that the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, could advise, “We must wipe Amalek out of our hearts whenever he attacks.” And when I myself pray the psalm that asks God to “strike my enemies on the jaw” (Ps. 3:7), I do not think of concrete individuals—but of “our ancient foe, who seeks to work us woe” (as Luther’s hymn puts it).

So I would question the woman’s repudiation of texts in which God is responsible for war and slaughter. I would ask, “Are there no struggles in Christian life from which it is right and encouraging still to sing, ‘Lord Sabaoth His Name / from age to age the same / *and He must win the battle’*?” If there are, then the witness of the Old Testament—even to YHWH as “a warrior” (Exod. 15:3)—may yet prove spiritually fortifying.

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