***Is the God of the Old Testament the Same as the God of the New?* (Paul Copan)**

**I. Intro: 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. *Two influential OT scholars (who resist the “Marcionite” charge):*** *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.”[[1]](#footnote-1) *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.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The true (“actual”) God isn’t behind violence—only the “textual God” (a literary representation).[[3]](#footnote-3) 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*” (9). (2) “*Virtuous**violence***”** has been used to justify colonialism, ethnic hatred, abusing women: “The Old Testament *itself* is part of the problem” (26). It absorbs much of the biblical writers’ own ancient Near Eastern values/beliefs (ethnocentrism, patriarchy, divine temporal 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”).

**II. This “harsh”/“violent” OT God vs. the NT “loving Father” is not accurate. NOTE: I’ll deal with Seibert more directly, but a few words on Enns’ charges:** “*tribal”:* from the outset, God has a plan for all nations—not just his “tribe” (Gen. 12:1-3); *“insider-outsider”:* OT itself calls for loving enemies (Pr. 25:21-22: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him”; Jonah); *“violent”:* we’ll see that the NT (including Jesus) doesn’t distance itself from the violent acts of divine judgment in the OT.

***1. 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.*** But just because people abuse Scripture doesn’t mean the Scriptures weren’t divinely inspired (e.g., Jesus’ words in the Gospels were most frequently quoted to support Crusades); the potential for abuse isn’t a decisive argument. Also, Enns/Seibert don’t appear to read the NT critically and carefully, but selectively.

***2. 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.***Other gains: democracy, literacy, human/women’s/civil rights, the rise of modern science, free market bringing hundreds of millions out of poverty (China, India).[[4]](#footnote-4)

***3. Seibert’s negative comment that the church “grandly proclaims” the Bible to be God’s Word is rather unfair.*** Jesus himself “grandly proclaims” this as well—down to the “smallest letter or stroke” (Matt. 5:18; cf. John 10:35). Paul does too (2 Tim. 3:16). Seibert’s view of Scripture (“general” inspiration) is different than that of Jesus (“comprehensive,” which Seibert rejects). Jesus/NT writers don’t distance themselves from the OT, and they don’t make a big distinction between the “textual” and “actual” God.

***4. We must be careful not to appeal to Jesus’s authority selectively.*** Like the OT prophets, Jesus denounces/threatens judgments—*both* temporal and final (Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem [Mt. 24; Mk. 13]); he assumes Sodom, Tyre, Sidon, Noah’s contemporaries had been *divinely* and *violently* judged, and he condemns Bethsaida, Chorazin, and Capernaum (Matt. 11:21–24; cf. 10:15; Matt. 24:37–39; Lk. 17:26-32: “flood came…; rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all”). He makes a whip/drives out moneychangers (John 2:15; cf. Mark 11:15–17). Stumbling blocks should have a millstone hung around their necks and drowned (Matt. 18:6); “wretched” vine-growers (Israel’s leaders) will face judgment (Matt. 21:41; Mark 12:9). Jesus tells a parable of a master who returns to an evil, inattentive slave and “will cut him in pieces” (Matt. 24:51; Luke 12:46; cf. Mark 12:9; Luke 20:16: cp. Mt. 22:7: ***“****But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire”*). *Christ affirms the death penalty was commanded in the OT (Mt. 15:4).* He will “make war” on the Nicolaitans/throw “Jezebel” on a “bed of sickness, “kill”/bring “pestilence” (Rev. 2:16, 20-3).

***5. We must not ignore other NT affirmations of God as a severe judge (cp. Heb. 12:15-25: “If those [Israelites at Sinai] did not escape…, much less shall we….for our God is a consuming fire”).*****Paul** affirms temporal punishments on Israel as an example to us (1 Cor. 10); God sends sickness/death for abuse at the Lord’s Table (1 Cor. 11:30). **Stephen and Paul** affirm *God’s* driving out Canaanites (Acts 7:45; 13:19); **the author of Hebrews** speaks of faith that “conquered kingdoms,” of those who “became mighty in war,” and “put foreign armies to flight” (11:33–34; cp. Noah and Abraham and “violence” in vv. 7, 17) In **Revelation**, Jesus will “strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty” (vv. 13, 15; cp. “the God of the OT”: Isa. 63:2–6). Like Jesus, **Peter** (2 Peter 3:1–13) assumes the violent judgment of Noah’s flood.

***6. Jesus and NT writers don’t actually read the OT “in a nonviolent way”*** (Noah’s flood; Mosaic capital punishment; the destruction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Tyre, and Sidon). Seibert/Enns force a pacifistic grid on the NT. But soldiers in the NT are viewed positively (Mt. 8:1-13; 27:54 and par.; Lk. 3:14; Ac. 10), and many positive soldiering/warfare images are used (1 Cor. 9:6-7; 2 Cor. 2:14-16; 6:4-7; Eph. 6:10-18; Phil. 2:25; Col. 2:15; 4:10; 1 Thes. 5:8; 1 Tim. 1:18; 2 Tim. 2:3-6; Rev. 2:10, 12, 26-27; 4:11; 5:6-14; 7:12; 9:9-11; 13:1-18; 16:14; 17:14; 19:11-16). The NT doesn’t take a nonviolent or pacifistic view of “the God of the OT.” **Paul** even speaks of the government having the power of using lethal force (Rom. 13:4); he himself benefits from military force when his life is under threat (Acts 23). **Peter** with Ananias and Sapphira (death, Acts 5:1-11) and Paul with Elymas (blindness, Ac. 13:11)? The **Eleven** invoke imprecatory psalms (Acts 1:20 NASB; cf. Ps. 69:25; 109:8). **Paul** and **Jesus** use severe language (“children” and “son of the devil” (Jn. 8:44; Acts 13:10; cp. 1 Jn. 3:10; cp. Mt. 23: “hypocrites”). Paul wishes the Judaizers would go the whole way and mutilate themselves (Gal. 5:12). At the judgment Babylon, “Rejoice over her…because God has pronounced judgment for you against her” (Rev. 18:20; cp. Pss. 96:10-13; 97:7-9; 98:7-9; 99:4-5; cp. “They deserve it” [Rev. 16:6]).[[5]](#footnote-5) John Stott on imprecatory psalms: “We cannot desire their salvation in defiance of their own unwillingness to receive it. This is the heart of the matter….We should earnestly desire the salvation of sinners if they would repent and equally, earnestly desire their (and our) destruction if they (or we) will not.” [[6]](#footnote-6)

***7. “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).*** Habakkuk: “In wrath remember mercy” (3:2). John Goldingay: “Many modern people don’t like the way the book [of Joshua] portrays Joshua’s leading Israel in killing many Canaanites, but there is no indication that the New Testament shares this modern unease. The New Testament pictures Joshua as a great hero (see Hebrews 11) and portrays God’s violent dispossession of the Canaanites as part of the achievement of God’s purpose in salvation (see Acts 7). If there is a contradiction between loving your enemies and being peacemakers, on one hand, and Joshua’s undertaking this task at God’s command, on the other, the New Testament does not see it.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

***8. There are differences in God’s dealings with his people under both covenants*** (e.g., capital punishment vs. church discipline for adultery [1 Cor. 5]); God permits inferior moral conditions in the OT like patriarchy (e.g., Matt. 19:8). But Jesus and his earliest followers take for granted the same unchanging character of the God of the OT. In studying violence in Scripture, we must not do violence *to* Scripture.

**Conclusion:** All religions want to claim Jesus, yet he identifies himself with Yahweh, acts as his agent, and doesn’t distance himself from the OT and divine judgment. Jesus/Yahweh is not safe, but he is good.

1. Peter Enns, “Is Peter Enns a Marcionite?,” *Rethinking Biblical Christianity* (blog), January 17, 2014, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peterenns/2014/01/is-pete-enns-a-marcionite/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eric Seibert, “When the ‘Good Book’ Is Bad,” *Rethinking Biblical Christianity* (blog), February 1, 2013, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/peterenns/2013/02/when-the-good-book-is-bad-challenging-the-bibles-violent-portrayals-of-god/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eric Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason* (New York: Random House, 2006); R.D. Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 244–274. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gordon Wenham, *Psalms as Torah* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 167-79, 197-201. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Stott, *Favorite Psalms* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Goldingay, *Joshua, Judges & Ruth for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)