



How might I understand the dark and violent pictures of God in the Old Testament?

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction...a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a ... racist, ... malevolent bully."
Richard Dawkins

The violence of the Old Testament

can be a huge stumbling block for many. For example, God telling His people "...when the Lord your God has delivered them over to you...you must destroy them totally...and show them no mercy." (Deuteronomy 7:2) or God saying, "I will make my arrows drunk with blood, while my sword devours flesh." (32:41-42).

It is hard to reconcile this with the picture of God through Jesus who told His disciples to love their enemies, refused to call down fire on His enemies (Luke 9: 51-56) and most importantly died for His enemies on the cross.



Christians have wrestled with this in three ways.

Both texts reveal truths about God – that He is loving and violent or vengeful. But it is hard not to end up with two "gods".

Reject the Old Testament (Marcion) – but Jesus did not do this.

Reinterpret the Old Testament through the lens of the New in order to hold on to two truths:

The fact that Jesus endorses the Old Testament.
But that as the full revelation of God, He sometimes contradicts the portrayal of God's character in it.



What might help us reconcile these two ideas?

God is not the cause of a lot of the Bible's evil. The Bible also consistently reveals that there are cosmic forces of evil with free choice – "hostile waters" or monsters such as a Leviathan, or satan – "the whole world is under the control of the evil one." (1 John 5:19)

When God withdraws His presence. In some instances the violence of God is more a question of God leaving people to their own devices and allowing evil to run its course. Isaiah says to God "for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins." (64:7).

God does not use violence or punish directly but allows others as free agents to do so by withdrawing. This is most clearly illustrated on the cross, in which as Christ is "forsaken" by God, others are free to crucify Him.

God's grieving over the pain of people's rebellion: "How can I hand you over, Israel?...My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused...I will not carry out my fierce anger...For I am God, and not a man..." (Hosea 11: 8-9)



Trusting in the clearest picture of God's character

Even though not all violence in the Bible is about God acting directly there are still over 1,000 passages in which God commands or acts violently in the Bible.

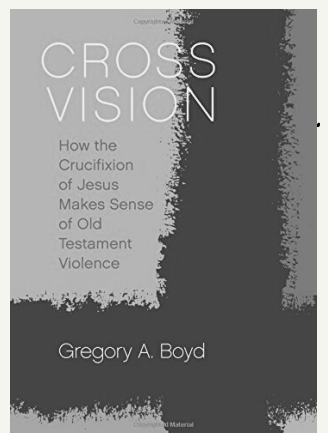
Recently Greg Boyd has argued that however we understand these passages, it must be through the lens of the clearest picture of God's character the Bible gives us.

He tells an imaginative story where he happens to see his wife across the street. Before he can get close enough to greet her, he observes her walking up to someone who is begging, stealing his cap, knocking over his collection cup, and kicking over him in his wheelchair.

But because he knows and trusts his wife after 37 years of marriage, he cannot believe that these actions truly reflect her character. Instead there must be something else going on.

Looking at Jesus on the cross reveals the full heart of God as one who loves His enemies, becoming nothing, out of self-sacrificial love for humankind.

Unless we trust that the cross is the most complete way in which God's character is shown to us, we will be forced to think that the violent portraits of God actually reveal His character.



So in the violent portraits of God, what could be going on that is consistent with the loving God we see in Christ crucified?

Self-emptying: The cross-bearing God is allowing human beings to see Him as ugly in order to reach them.

On the cross, we see that, because of His self-emptying love, God in Christ was willing to appear to many as a criminal, and under the curse of sin.

God reveals himself by stooping to bear the sin of his people, taking on an ugly appearance that mirrors the ugliness of their sin, out of a loving desire to be in relationship with sinful human beings.

Perhaps one way of understanding the way that the cross-bearing God risks being seen as ugly helps us to read violent passages as God allowing Himself to be seen as being like the vengeful gods of other surrounding cultures because that is what people expect Him to be.

God allows people to perceive Him in this way, at cost to Himself, in order to move them towards gradually understanding what He is really like.



Self-adapting: God is accommodating Himself to human behaviour in order to be in relationship with human beings.

In Christ God is willing to stoop down and enter into our humanity to reach us, adapting Himself to us by becoming a human being, knowing that, in our own fallen state, we are not able to see Him as He fully is.

Boyd argues that in His love, God always comes alongside people as they are, even if this means appearing to condone aspects of their sin.

God's self-giving love never forces people to change, so He necessarily must bear with us, seeking to influence His people towards His love – a pattern we see through the Bible.



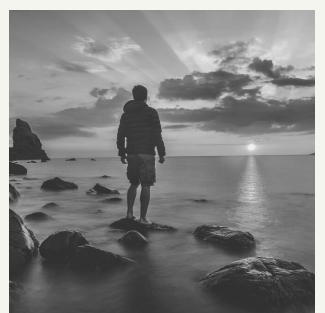
Self-giving: God allows our picture of Him to develop throughout history and the Bible, at cost to Himself.

God allows people's understanding of Him to develop. This is true in the Bible, but still true for us today.

Because we are His covenant-partners, God allows us to have genuine freedom in growing to understand Him more over time.

God influences Scripture more than He dictates it. This means that what is revealed about God through the Bible progresses and grows (Progressive Revelation).

The same God is walking with His covenant-people throughout the whole Bible, accommodating Himself to them, allowing them to see and portray Him as less than He is, and their understanding to develop over time.



This is entirely what you would expect from a cross-bearing, self-emptying God who will allow humans to see Him in whatever way they want in order to reach out to them in love. Beneath the surface of the ugly portrayals of God is self-giving, humble love.