A Peculiar Blend of Cruciform (Boyd Project 4)

The previous issue dealt with chapter 1-6 of Greg Boyd's monumental book, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*. It presents Boyd's general theory of interpretation, which can be summarized in one word: cruciform. The second half of volume 1, chapter 7-12, deals more specifically with the problem of violence in Scripture and discusses possible solutions. This part made for a more hobbling read.

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This is the fourth installment of a project that will take me several issues to complete. The subject is a big one: what some people refer to as the violence of God in the OT. Gregory Boyd has written a 1400-page book about this: The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross *(2017a). I have been asked for my opinion; this has led me to undertake this project.*

For one, there are too many digressions. And more importantly, the book suffers from an overdose of quotations. It is as if Boyd strives to include anything and anyone that offers support for this or that feature

of his argument, as if no morsel of truth should fall by the wayside.

Sometimes this leads to humorous effects. When Boyd argues against the 'Dismissal' solution (to be explained later), he quotes Fretheim (2004: 28):

> The violent portraits of God thus reveal a God who is not above sullying his reputation by working with a fallen, violence-prone people in the midst of an oppressed, violence-filled world. As such, these depictions are "not a matter of despair," he [= Fretheim] argues, "but of hope." He then continues:
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> "God does not simply give people up to experience violence. God chooses to become involved in violence so that evil will not have the last word. In everything, including violence, God seeks to accomplish loving purposes. Thereby God may prevent an even greater evil." (Boyd 2017a: 347, quoting Fretheim 2004:28)

Fretheim (2004: 28) finishes his article thus: "But, in order to accomplish God's work in the world, God may respond in violent ways in and through various agents so that sin and evil do not go unchecked in the life of the world." I wholeheartedly agree with Fretheim. But both his article and these quotes fly in the face of Boyd's own view that God is eternally non-violent.

(In addition, this 2004 article also undermines Boyd's claim that no one has done what he attempts to do, finding a cruciform understanding of 'violent portrayals' of God in the Bible. Anyone reading Boyd's book should read, should perhaps start with reading, this article by Fretheim. Although I don't agree with everything, I find it more illuminating than the book. In its mere 11 pages Fretheim even includes a definition of violence!)

In what follows, I will focus on chapter 7, a sample of violent passages in the Old Testament, and chapter 11, where Boyd presents his very own version of a cruciform hermeneutic. I will briefly touch on chapter 8 and 9, which deal with alternative solutions. I will skip chapter 10 (mostly about the church father Origen) and chapter 12 (about the Theological Interpretation of Scripture movement). Since this is a long issue, I place two long quotes in an appendix.

Examples of Violence (Chapter 7)

It makes sense to provide examples of the problem we are dealing with. It also makes sense to want to steer away from diminishing or playing down problematic elements as well as from exaggeration. Boyd confesses as much:

> This is not to say I have any interest in exaggerating the revolting nature of this material, as some recent critics have done … My aim is to simply be ruthlessly honest about the troubling nature of the material that comprises "the dark side" of the Bible. (Boyd 2017a: 290)

When it comes to critics of the New Testament who accuse it of antisemitism, Boyd argues for a charitable reading: "But for these texts to be understood correctly, they must be read within their own first-century,

socio-historical context and within the context of the rhetorical presuppositions and genre constraints of that time and place" (Ibid.: 561). Well said. But when it comes to the OT, his reading is decidedly uncharitable:

> I simply cannot find a more polite way of describing, with integrity, portraits of God doing things like causing fetuses to be ripped out of their mothers' wombs (Hos 13:16), instigating parents to cannibalize their children (Lev 26:29; Jer 19:9; Lam 2:20; Ezek 5:10; cf. Deut 28:53–57), or commanding his people to merciless massacre [sic] entire populations (e.g., Deut 7:2). If portraits of God doing things like this do not qualify as "horrific," "macabre," or "revolting," what would? (Ibid.: 290f)

God "instigating parents to cannibalize their children"!? Look up the references and you will find God does nothing of the kind. In most cases, the text merely states what will happen; except for Jeremiah 19:9 (and much could be said about this verse), the text does not claim that God is the cause, let alone that he *instigates* people to do this.

I have dealt with some of this material in issue 1 and issue 2 in this series. I will therefore limit myself to a few examples.

Boyd even argues that the Israelites initially practiced child sacrifice, which they understood to have been commanded by God. After all, Exodus 22:29f gives the same command for children as for cattle, without reference to a redemption option. Later, so this theory, the son had to be redeemed, but originally, he would have been sacrificed; this is the origin of the commandment that the firstborn son belongs to Yahweh. (*Response*: in the text, Exodus 13:13 precedes Exodus 22 and has already communicated this provision for the firstborn son: he is to be redeemed, not killed or sacrificed. The text chooses not to repeat this provision.)

Boyd finds confirmation in the story of Jephthah sacrificing his daughter (Jd. 11:29ff): "This narrative thus reflects the apparently normative belief of Israelites at this time that Yahweh grants military victories in exchange for sacrificed children" (Boyd 2017a: 310). (*Response*: Jephthah may have believed this, but that does not make it "normative." Boyd misses the real point of this narrative in the larger context of Judges: yet one more indication of Israel's grievous state and its dismal deviation from God's standard.)

He also pulls in Ezekiel 20:25f, where God “gave [Israel] statues that were not good,” as referring to God ordering child sacrifice (mentioned in verse 26). However, this appears to follow, not proceed, the giving of the law at Sinai (implying child sacrifice was not the original practice); it is more easily understood as God giving them up to their own consistently law-breaking practices than as God demanding child sacrifice.

In dealing with the OT, Boyd tends to be inappropriately judgmental. This stance is perhaps best illustrated with his take on the imprecatory psalms, those psalms in which the author heaps curses on his enemies:

> While we should, of course, applaud the longing for divine justice reflected in these psalms, we must also frankly acknowledge that these vengeful psalms blatantly contradict the teaching and example of Jesus on forgiveness as well as Paul’s teaching that we are to always love, which he says is always “kind,” never “dishonors others,” “keeps no record of wrongs,” “does not delight in evil,” “always protects, always trusts,” and “always hopes” (1 Cor 13:4–7; cf. I Cor 16:14). (Boyd 2017a: 327)

The psalmist did not have the teaching of Jesus and Paul, and therefore cannot be held accountable or be judged by this standard. He cannot contradict what had not yet been written. Besides, these psalms record what people said, not what God did, and are therefore irrelevant here.

Boyd also takes issue with narratives that do not condemn the violence they describe: “In light of what we learn about God in the crucified Christ, the manner in which certain biblical authors recount episodes of horrific violence without condemning it – indeed, while sometimes seeming to eulogize it – is problematic, to say the least” (2017a: 330). Ironically, he follows this up with the example of Judges 19-21, indeed one of the most horrific narratives in the OT. But that is precisely the point: part of Israel had sunk to the level of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the tribes found no good way to deal with it. This is indeed horrific. There is no need to state the obvious, and there certainly isn’t any approval implied.

I do not deny that there are challenging passages to wrestle with in the OT, but Boyd’s reading of OT Scripture is not only uncharitable, it is also surprisingly insensitive to cultural and literary features. To take these seriously is not to diminish the problem; it enables us to recognize the deep and subtle wisdom of the text. In addition, it makes no sense to judge ancient texts based on 21st-century moral outrages.

Alternative Solutions (Chapter 8 and 9)

Boyd calls his own solution the ‘Redefinition’ solution. It is introduced in chapter 11. He first deals with two alternative solutions.

One option in responding to violence in the OT, discussed in chapter 8, is simply to dismiss passages falling short of a cruciform standard: they are not authoritative Scripture. Boyd calls this the ‘Dismissal’ solution. He dismisses this alternative (pun intended) because it fails to do justice to all Scripture being God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16).

The second option, discussed in chapter 9, is to attempt a synthesis of what is revealed about God on the cross and in the OT; this is the ‘Synthesis’ solution. I find this the least convincing chapter in the book so far. It does not present these alternatives (plural, because they include a number of quite diverse views; see the first issue in this series for specifics) fairly. These positions cannot be reduced to “violent divine portraits must be accepted at face value as accurate revelations of God” (Boyd 2017a: 336).

In fact, it is Boyd who accepts these passages “at face value” – and therefore concludes they are not “accurate revelations.”

In addition, Boyd’s own solution includes a measure of synthesis as well, since he still wants to find something of value in the relevant OT passages. After all, he does not dismiss them. And most varieties of a ‘Synthesis’ solution include at least a measure of redefinition. It is not like no one has been reading the old in the light of the new or in the light of the Christ event. And it is not like no one has been wrestling with moral challenges in the OT until now. The difference between solutions is not a matter of either ‘Synthesis’ or ‘Redefinition;’ it is a matter of degree (how much redefinition) and of type (what kind of redefinition).

So what kind of redefinition does Boyd propose? This is the topic of chapter 11, a crucial one, because it is here that Boyd presents his own proposal, a new and unique version of the cruciform hermeneutic.

Boyd’s Version of Cruciform (Chapter 11)

This proposal is all about a parallel between what happened on the cross and what happens in ‘violent portraits’ of God in the OT. In both, God stooped to allow humans to disfigure his appearance. In this way, the violent portrayals of God prefigure the crucifixion: God allowed humans to misrepresent him, just as he allowed humans to disfigure Jesus. This is how the violent passages point to Christ.

Here is a summary of the argument. First, Boyd assumes that the term *God-breathed* (2 Tim. 3:16) applies not only to the text of the Bible but also to the cross: this event, too, is God-breathed. Then, he argues that this term describes something relational: it is a process in which both God and humans were actively

involved. On the cross, God allowed humans to mar the appearance of Jesus beyond recognition. Likewise, he allowed human involvement in writing the Old Testament. Because of people's imperfection and sinful resistance, this led to a measure of distortion. In other words, God allowed humans to mar his appearance in the text. Notice the implication: significant parts of the OT misrepresent God. (It does not plead for Boyd's argumentation that it includes as examples of misrepresentation the words of Job's friends and the complaints of Jeremiah; these are indeed words in the Bible that obviously speak wrongly of God, but this is clear as day in the text itself.)

No matter how long I look at it, I don't see it. There is no parallel. Even within Boyd's understanding of *God-breathed*, I recognize no parallel between the cross and violent portrayals. The ugliness of the cross and the supposed ugliness of these portraits are very different. In the first, God in Christ is the victim; in the second, God is the alleged perpetrator. Dashing children against the rocks is revolting, just like crucifying an innocent man. But the moral revulsion is directed against different parties. It is not Jesus on the cross who is morally revolting. (And by the way, *contra* Boyd 2017a: 323, it is never God who is portrayed as dashing or making others dash children against the rock.)

There was nothing sinful in Jesus on the cross and he is not wrongly represented, whereas the portrayals of God are indeed wrongful and immoral if Boyd is right: what God is (wrongfully) claimed to have done is, so Boyd, morally wrong and worthy of condemnation. Indeed, there is contrast here rather than parallel: Christ on the cross does not contradict God's nature but God engaging in violence, in Boyd's view, does. Boyd understands the latter, God's violence, to be a mere and wrongful appearance, a misrepresentation; but that Christ is disfigured in his appearance on the cross is real and true.

Boyd's argument is complex and difficult to grasp (not to say convoluted). I will include two longer quotations from Cross Vision, the shorter version of Boyd's proposal, in the appendix (seeing this issue is already long), so you have it in his own words as well. I don't find his proposal convincing. It makes me wonder why we would study the OT very much, seeing that significant parts of it are wrong and misrepresent God. Especially if we include other issues. Boyd puts the spotlight on violence, but there are more: slavery, polygamy, treatment of women, a sacrificial system that cannot take away sin (Heb. 10:4), purity laws that exclude people with leprosy from the community, etc. Is violence a greater evil than being untruthful? If God cannot command violence, can he command things that are less than true or good?

If all we get from this is example after example after example of God's humble and loving willingness to bend down and submit to misrepresentation, just as Jesus submitted to the cross, our attention is better directed elsewhere.

How Do Violent Passages Point to Christ?

One more thing needs to be covered in this issue: how do violent passages point to Christ? This is the question Boyd asks of the 'Synthesis' solution. Based on a general cruciform hermeneutic, everything in Scripture in some way has to point to Christ and to the cross. So how do violent passages do this?

I think there are better answers than the one Boyd gives us. One rather obvious way in which OT passages point to Christ is by showing our moral corruption and the consequences of our fallen state, and therefore our need for a redeemer. In the OT, God provides warning examples (the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Israel in the desert, Israel's exile, several judgments on individuals). These examples are not very many,

and there is a clear tendency not to repeat. God provides a demo of consequences and makes sure it is recorded in Scripture, so we can learn from it. But then he moves on because his true delight and his true aim is the work of salvation, not that of judgment.

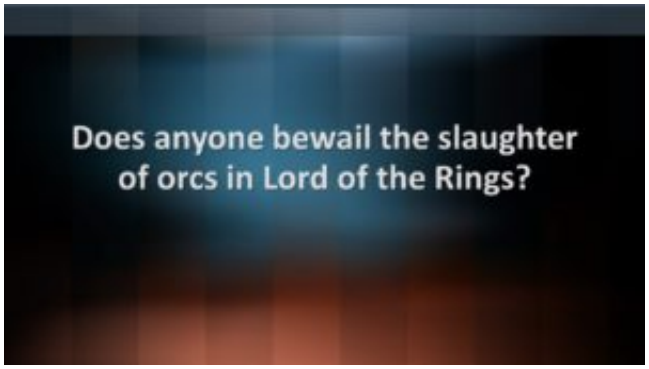
God is love. Is it love to let an individual or a group proceed (in the name of free will?) on a road of evil leading to corruption and destruction, without firing a warning shot? Might it be valid to set an example? Doesn't love explain some of the strong language in the OT, where God's bark is obviously worse than his bite? And isn't it right and loving to provide sufficient evidence of our human lostness and where it leads, as illustrated in the history of Israel?

These thoughts are only a start. I would combine this with a more conventional understanding of accommodation than Boyd's: out of love, God was willing to enter the messy and violent world of humans to get involved and change it from the inside out.

For God to stoop and put up (and go along) with Israel's violence is no less cruciform than Boyd's proposal. It has the added advantage that we don't have to mark significant parts of the OT as "wrong."

What Is Left for This Project?

The second volume of The Crucifixion of the Warrior God presents four principles that make up what Boyd calls the 'Cruciform Thesis,' essentially four possible explanations for divine violence in the OT. I assume he will provide ample illustrations for each principle. I will try and see if this can be fitted into one issue (December), so I am ready to move on to something else in January.



References

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Id. (2017b), *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, Kindle Edition)

Fretheim, Terence E. F. (2004), "God and Violence in the Old Testament," *Word & World* 24,1: 18-28

Standard Bible Society (2001), *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society)

Appendix

Since this issue is long, I include two longer quotes in this appendix with a few comments.

"I submit that we should read Scripture expecting to find God sometimes revealing his beautiful character by stooping to bear the ugly sin of his people, thereby taking on a surface appearance that mirrors that sin, just as he does on the cross. [This, and the next paragraph, is what I consider to be a false parallel, as argued above. On the cross, the sin is what is done *to* Jesus *by* others; in the OT, the sinful action, even though it is wrongfully attributed, is performed by *God*] And to discern this beauty, we should expect that we will need to exercise faith to look through the sin-mirroring surface of these portraits to discern something else going on behind the scenes.

Along the same lines, we should expect that the something else that is going on behind the scenes of these sin-mirroring portraits is precisely what is going on behind the sin-mirroring cross: God, out of his love, is humbly stooping to bear the sin of his people, thereby taking on an ugly appearance that reflects this sin. This is how I propose we interpret all portraits of God in the Bible that on the surface reflect a character that is inconsistent with the cruciform character of God revealed on the cross, including especially the OT's violent depictions of God.

Consider, for example, Jeremiah's macabre representation of Yahweh vowing not to let mercy or compassion stop him from smashing families together (Jer 13: 14). If we trust that the cross reveals what God is truly like, then we know that God would never vow to surpress his mercy and compassion in order to mercilessly smash families to death. So we must assess this ugly surface appearance of God to be a reflection of Jeremiah's own fallen, culturally conditioned, ugly conception of God. [Notice he takes Jeremiah at face value. On this reading, except for a few brighter chapters in the book, one might as well skip reading Jeremiah entirely. Notice also how judgmental and uncharitable this reading is toward Jeremiah.]

However, our faith in the God revealed on the cross also also [sic) transforms this portrait into a two-way mirror. For when read in light of the cross we are able to look through this ugly sin-mirroring surface to behold the beautiful cruciform God stooping to bear Jeremiah's sinful conception of him, which is why God takes on this ugly appearance in Jeremiah's contribution to the biblical narrative. Interpreted through the looking-glass cross, violent divine portraits like Jeremiah's become both beautiful and revolting for all the same reasons the cross is both beautiful and revolting." (Boyd 2017b: Loc. 1075-1091)

The issue in the second quote is: did God actually do certain 'reproachable' things or is he merely and therefore wrongfully portrayed as doing so?

"Let me at this point address a possible objection. Some have argued that the four accommodations discussed in this chapter do not merely reflect God accommodating his people's fallen and culturally conditioned views of him. They rather reflect accommodating behaviors that God actually engaged in. In this view, for example, God didn't merely stoop to accommodate his people's culturally conditioned view of him as capable of giving remarkably violent laws. God actually stooped to giving these violent laws.

I can agree with this perspective up to the point that the accommodating activity ascribed to God does not conflict with the self-sacrificial, nonviolent, enemy-embracing love of God revealed in the crucified Christ. But insofar as any divine portrait is not consistent with this revelation, fidelity to Christ compels me to see it not as an accurate depiction of something God actually did, but as a reflection of something God's people at the time assumed God did.

To this degree, it doesn't reflect God acting toward people; it rather reflects God humbly stooping to allow the fallen and culturally conditioned state of his people to act upon him. To the extent that any portrait conflicts with the crucified Christ, in other words, I must assess it as an indirect, rather than a direct, revelation.

To be more specific, I do not in principle have a problem accepting that God actually stooped to play the roles that are ascribed to him surrounding the accommodations of polygamy, concubines, divorce and remarriage, as well as the institution of monarchy. [Notice that this reflects Boyd's hierarchy of evils: God cannot order violence but regulating polygamy, for instance, is thinkable. Is the latter really less bad? Less bad than animal sacrifice? Shouldn't this be considered a form of violence against women, seeing it certainly violates their value and dignity?] However, when it comes to assessing the 613 laws that pertain to the first covenant, including commands to perform animal sacrifices and to execute certain types of people, things get more complex and ambiguous. We would actually need to assess each law individually, which obviously is beyond the scope of this book.

So let us settle on this guiding principle: Insofar as any law reflects an improvement over the prevailing laws of the ANE [= Ancient Near East], I submit that it reflects God acting toward his people. As barbaric as many of the OT laws are, most reflect an improvement, and sometimes a significant improvement, over the laws of Israel's neighbors, and this surely is the result of the influential work of God's Spirit. But insofar as any law falls short of the character of God revealed in Jesus's cross-centered ministry [hard to find a law that does *not* fall short of this standard!], it reflects the point at which the fallen and culturally conditioned state of his people resisted the Spirit and, therefore, the point at which God stooped to allow his people to act upon him. In my view, all portraits of God in the Bible should be assessed by this criterion. While there is ambiguity and complexity surrounding the particulars, what is most important for our purposes is perfectly clear: insofar as any law or any activity that is ascribed to God involves violence against humans or animals, it must to this degree be considered an accommodating, sin-mirroring portrait that indirectly bears witness to the sin-bearing God revealed on Calvary." [Notice Boyd's criterion here is *nonviolence*; whether this is implied in *cruciform* is debatable; in all 'lesser' evils God may have been involved.] (Boyd 2017b: Loc.1834-1858)

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