Crucifying the Warrior God (Boyd Project 5)

It is time to wrap up. How does Boyd's cruciform hermeneutic work when it is applied to actual Bible passages? In the first volume of *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, Boyd posits the cross as the centre and foundation of Christian theology. From this, he derives, through deduction, what God can and cannot have said and done. Violent portrayals of God in the OT stand in contradiction to his conclusions. In the second volume, Boyd presents his solution to this problem: he proposes four principles that explain "what is really going on" in such passages. In the final analysis, this does not seem to leave much room for open questions. The book presents a closed system that can now be imposed on the text.

The four principles are:

- Cruciform accommodation
- Redemptive withdrawal
- Cosmic conflict
- Semiautonomous power

I will briefly discuss each of these principles.

This is the fifth and final installment of a larger project: Gregory Boyd's 1400-page book dealing with the

violence of God in the OT: 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.*

You can also watch this content as a VIDEO PODCAST *or listen to it as an* AUDIO PODCAST

Divine Accommodation or Human Misrepresentation?

The first principle is that of cruciform accommodation. I have two problems with this. First, it is unclear to me how it is different from or adds to what has been covered in volume 1. Already there, Boyd argued that the content of the cruciform hermeneutic is divine accommodation or condescension. This now reappears as a principle. Boyd clearly intends a distinction between the hermeneutic and the principle. Although I tried hard, I fail to get this distinction.

Second and more seriously, Boyd goes far beyond a conventional understanding of accommodation, but he is not very clear or upfront about this. Traditionally, accommodation has always been understood as something God does: adjustments he makes in order that people can understand him. To Boyd, it includes what people do to God to make him fit their cultural misconceptions when they write about him in Scripture.

Does God present himself in a certain way, condescending to the level of humans, or do humans misrepresent him? This is the crucial question. For instance, that God is portrayed as a divine warrior in the OT is accommodation – but by whom? Did God reveal himself this way or did humans create wrongful conceptions of him? Is this depiction of God as a warrior his idea used to communicate something people could understand? Or does it originate, as Boyd sees it, in "the culturally conditioned [and sinful!] mindset" of human authors (Boyd 2017: 703)? Is it their "twisted ways" that distort God's true character, resulting in portrayals that show God engaged in sinful activity? Boyd believes it is the latter. Therefore, the Bible does not always speak truthfully about God.

Throughout, Boyd does not acknowledge the huge difference it makes whether God actively accommodated people's limitations or passively let people project their own misconceptions onto him, producing wrongful portrayals: ascribing to God things he never said or did, including things that are downright sinful. Arguments for the first kind of accommodation (the common, traditional, and widely accepted meaning of the term; God obviously does this kind of thing, for instance when it comes to polygamy) are treated as evidence for the second kind.

Boyd's dogmatic insistence on nonviolence leads him to state (rather than prove) that God was never involved in violence, not even reluctantly. He must go to this extreme because his views do not allow God to engage in or actively condone any form of violence. If we find violence in the text, this must therefore be the result of human distortion to which God acquiesces.

As a further consequence, war is always a lack of faith on Israel's behalf, according to Boyd. When Israel takes up the sword, it is thereby expressing its unwillingness to trust in God. God would really have preferred to "fight" in a very different way. This also applies to the conquest of Canaan. Boyd argues that "Yahweh originally hoped to relocate the indigenous population and get his people into the land nonviolently" (Boyd 2017: 941; the conquest is the subject of chapter 19 and 20, which are part of the section dealing with the next principle, even though it has little to do with divine withdrawal; for this reason, I

mention it here). If Israel had fully trusted in God, it would never have had to fight any battle with the sword, not even against the Amalekites in Exodus 17.

The Principle of Redemptive Withdrawal

According to the principle of redemptive withdrawal:

> God … brings judgement on people by simply withdrawing from them, thereby allowing them to experience the destructive consequences that are inherent in their sin but that are typically brought about by means of other agents who were already “bent on destruction.” (Boyd 2017: 769)

In part, this is simply the result of reaping consequences. It can also come about by God withdrawing and allowing others to do the harm they have in mind. Either way, God is not actively involved in any form of resulting violence. Perhaps the most obvious example of this in the OT is God withdrawing his protection from Jerusalem and so allowing the Babylonians to come and destroy the city.

Sin does indeed have negative consequences, an organic connection that can be expressed in the metaphor of sowing and reaping. In Romans 1, God gives people up to their evil passions. It is not uncommon to read in the OT how God hides his face or otherwise withdraws his presence as an expression of judgment. Sin and evil show an inherent self-destructive tendency.

In addition, Scripture often shows what Boyd calls a “dual speech pattern” (chapter 17), in which statements that someone did something can be synonymous with stating the person allowed something or indirectly made it happen. This especially applies to kings (including God) because everything that takes place happens under their authority and can therefore in some sense be said to be their doing.

In this context, Boyd also speaks of “metonymy of subject,” a figure of speech that takes this form:

> X does Y

In reality, X either declares, permits, foretells, or allows Y to happen. So the verb *to do* stands for one of these other activities. Human examples are Jeremiah 1:10 and 2 Samuel 12:9. In God’s case, he may be said to do something when he merely declares or allows it. One example is the death of the firstborn in Egypt, which is announced as God’s action in Exodus 11 and 12 but executed by “the destroyer” (Ex. 12:13). Boyd concludes:

> I consider the metonymy of the subject to be a relevant grammatical explanation for many examples of Scripture’s dual way of speaking about God, and I believe it nicely compliments the concept of Yahweh as a [sic] ANE monarch reigning over his creation. It serves to once again drive home the point that we ought not to read too much into passages that ascribe violent actions directly to God. (Boyd 2017: 864)

We ought not to read too much into passages that ascribe violent actions directly to God. Indeed! This is

good advice even though the book doesn't always observe it.

In addition to all the above, Boyd often refers to God's Aikido-like strategy. Aikido is a defensive martial art, in which the force and aggression of an attacker are turned back upon himself. This is how God often deals with evil: he turns it back upon itself so that it self-destructs. The appendix presents an illustration.

Criticism 1. I find this one of the better sections in the book. But these ideas are neither new nor do they represent redefinition based on Boyd's cruciform hermeneutic. All of this can be observed in the OT text itself. (As an aside, it therefore makes no sense that Boyd finds both the principle of cruciform accommodation and that of metonymy of subject in the same passage, for instance in Isaiah 53. If there is metonymy of subject, there is no wrongful portrayal that needs to be explained as God adjusting to the limited and perhaps even sinful misunderstandings of his people.)

Criticism 2. This works well for "broad" or general judgments, in which God indeed merely needs to step aside and let things run their course. But can we always 'exonerate' God so easily from his responsibility for what happens? What if the judgment is specific and restricted in focus, such as that of Sodom and Gomorrah, the firstborn in Egypt, and of the gang of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Nu. 16)? As we will see in the next section, Boyd ascribes these judgments to forces of evil rather than to human agents, but the question remains. If God's passive allowance for others to do harm is so specific and immediate, does it really make such a difference whether he executes the judgment himself or leaves this for others to do?

Criticism 3. Finally, this section raises serious questions about how God will overcome evil. Yes, there are examples where evil self-destructs and sin brings punishment upon itself. But is this the whole story? Will evil, including Satan and his minions, self-destruct in the end? Boyd's answer is not entirely clear, but this is what this section and the next (e.g. Boyd 2017: 1077) imply.

The Principle of Cosmic Conflict

The third principle is a necessary counterpart to the previous one. If God judges through withdrawing, not everything that happens can be ascribed to human agents. This does not work for natural and supernatural plagues and disasters. They must therefore be the work of evil forces that are always bent on destruction

but normally are held back from acting. When God withdraws his restraining power, however, they pound.

The principle is not essentially different from the previous one (and the same criticism applies); it merely sees different, non-human agents at work. No doubt, this plays a role; for instance, there is a reference to the destroyer in Exodus 12:13 and in 1 Corinthians 10:10. However, Boyd overextends the principle:

> More specifically, in light of the cross, I submit that all canonical depictions of God using nature as a weapon of judgment (e.g., the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah) can be, and should be, understood to be occasions in which God, with a grieving but hopeful heart, withdrew his protective hand to allow anti-creational forces that are “bent on destruction” (Isa 51:13; cf. Hab 1:9) to bring about “the undoing of creation” in an individual, people-group, or geographical region. (Boyd 2017:1071; one wonders what “a hopeful heart” means in respect to Sodom and Gomorrah)

Does Satan really have this kind of power over the physical creation? And when Satan and his forces surgically destroy Korah and his rebellious mob, and only them, because God presumably did not permit more, who then is the true author of this judgment?

Boyd claims “all divine judgements involving ’natural’ disasters” can be interpreted along these lines (ibid.: 1121); “it is always hostile cosmic powers that carry out whatever violence is involved in the final judgements brought about by ‘natural’ disasters” (ibid.; notice the breathtaking “always”).

It is here that we find some of the more fanciful interpretations in the book. For instance, Boyd turns angels into gods, as if the terms are synonyms. The “prince of Persia” in Daniel 11:20 therefore becomes (literally) “the god of Persia” (Boyd 2017: 1033). And these gods or angels are “clearly not unequivocally and irreversibly evil” – or good (ibid.: 1029).

Boyd dives deep into the mythology of the Canaanites and other people groups of the Ancient Near East. Numerous mythological elements such as Leviathan can indeed be found in the OT as they are used in various ways by biblical authors. In my opinion, however, Boyd gets this material exactly wrong by re-mythologizing the biblical worldview – but this is a subject for another letter.

Populating the invisible world with cosmic forces and evil monsters acting as independent agents enables him to turn natural violence, which would otherwise have to be interpreted as acts of God, into acts of demonic powers. It was not God who caused Pharaoh's army to drown but an evil power personified in mythology as the unruly sea: "the anti-creation of chaos monster was permitted to do what it always yearns to do – namely, devour all it can devour" (ibid.: 1176). Which also makes this an example of evil caving in upon itself and self-destructing.

Likewise, it wasn't God who sent the flood in Genesis. God withdrew his sustaining presence and cosmic forces of destruction undid his creation, returning it to the *tohuwabohu* of the beginning. The "destructive natural consequences of sin" (ibid.: 1127) were a factor as well (although it is unclear to me how human sin at that time could have such devastating "natural consequences." Consequently, God is not implicated "in the greatest massacre recounted in Scripture" (ibid.: 1100). Or is he? It was still a massacre and a judgment.

The Principle of Semiautonomous Power

The fourth principle asserts that "when God entrusts agents with supernatural authority, he does not meticulously control how these agents use this authority" (Boyd 2017: 637). To some extent, the power resides with them and can be abused.

I find this principle the hardest to assess. To what extent can we wield God-given power (in Boyd's term) semiautonomously? And to what extent does it require God's active participation? One example Boyd uses is that of the staff of Moses. Did the power reside in this object? When Moses hit the rock with his staff, contrary to God's instruction, water splashed out (Nu. 20:1-13). Does this prove that its power worked independently from God's direct involvement? Possibly, but I am not entirely convinced.

Boyd uses this principle to explain an incident in the life of Elijah. Once again, I take issue with Boyd's judgmental stance and failure to consider alternative explanations or interpretations. In 2 Kings 1, Elijah twice calls for fire from heaven that consumes a band of soldiers who have come to take him to the king. In Luke 9:54f, when James and John want to do the same thing with a village of Samaritans refusing to receive them, Jesus rebukes them. The two situations are wildly different, so it is conceivable that what is wrong in one might still be right in the other. However, this is not an option Boyd considers; it is clear Elijah abused his God-given power:

> Jesus would have rebuked Elijah for this murderous supernatural feat had Elijah carried it out during Jesus's ministry. (Boyd 2017: 1224)
>
> In any event, the ruthless character Elijah displayed in this needless slaughter [of 400 Baal priests] renders it unsurprising when he later used divine authority to needlessly incinerate a hundred men. (Ibid.: 1225)
>
> Elijah's fear-motivated act of destruction was predicated on a sinful lack of trust in Yahweh. (Ibid.: 1226)
>
> And because of his proclivity to fear, based on his lack of confidence in Yahweh when facing threatening kings, Elijah chose to use this power in way [sic] that definitely does not reflect the will and character of God, as revealed in the crucified Christ. (Ibid.: 1226; a revelation that of course had not yet taken place)

One wonders why Elijah gets several positive mentions in the NT. At any rate, this is the least important of the four principles and only gets one chapter in Boyd's book.

Final Assessment

It has been a long journey. Before I close, I do want to make it clear that I do not doubt Boyd's motivation or his commitment to Christ. I admire his passion for Jesus. I admit the issues he addresses are tough and in part uncomfortable and therefore in need of serious thought. But obviously, I prefer a different answer.

This answer acknowledges divine accommodation, but as more traditionally understood, that is, as something God does. This leads to the concept of progressive revelation: God fully entered the world of the Ancient Near East, accommodating its culture and speaking its language, in order to lead humanity to a better way. For this reason, when it comes to applying such passages today, we can say we know better now, without judging those who lived and acted back then, at a different stage of this unfolding revelation. I believe the biblical record of those earlier stages deserves a reading that is more sensitive to the rich literary and cultural nuance of the relevant texts than Boyd often seems to manage (for an illustration, see the appendix below). I am also convinced that any credible answer needs to leave room for open questions; closed systems of 'truth' are false comfort.

I will close with four important objections I have to Boyd's proposal, in addition to his unconventional understanding of accommodation.

A weak view of God. With this, I don't mean I prefer a stronger and more martial God than Boyd presents, the way some evangelicals do. On this, I am not too far removed from Boyd; the measure of true greatness is to have power and not to use it, and God's glory is nowhere more splendidly displayed than on the cross.

But Boyd's God is weak in another respect. He is perennially hoping for the best and constantly disappointed. He initially hoped and planned for Israel to take the land nonviolently but reluctantly had to give up on this when Israel preferred the sword. Maybe *weak* is not the right word here, but he certainly appears naïve. He is also usually sad, deeply grieved, etc.

In addition, “God’s planned judgments do not always succeed!” (Boyd 2017: 899). This is “far from rare” (ibid.: 900). And when it comes to Leviathan and Behemoth in the book of Job (Job 38-41), “two formidable ANE cosmic beasts representing chaos and evil that Yahweh must combat to preserve order in the world … even Yahweh needs a sword as he engages them (40:19)” (ibid.: 1118).

A weak view of evil’s demise. Perhaps here, too, I should rather say naïve. God shows remarkable economy and restraint in dealing with evil, which does indeed show self-destructive tendencies. But is that all it will take to overcome evil? Will the dragon swallow the dragon (as in the title of chapter 24)? Will God never apply coercive force? I am not entirely sure if this is what Boyd believes but it is the impression that his book left me with. It is not quite how things worked in the past:

> And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day (Jude 6 ESV)

I get this sounds mythological, and whatever it refers to, it does so in what is probably highly figurative language. Even so, this implies violence. It involves the use of coercive force that completely and absolutely curtails the free will and agency of these powers. This does not sound like evil imploding and self-destructing. I suspect that at some point, God will (have to) do this again.

A strong view of anti-Christian rhetoric. In chapter 14 Boyd criticizes the church fathers for being unduly influenced by Greek and specifically Platonic philosophy. He may be right. Boyd does not suffer from this problem. Instead, he has his own blind spot as he is unduly influenced by the Bible-and-Christianity-bashing so popular in the West today. Sometimes (chapter 7), he all but joins them. He gives too much to modern critics of the Bible and Christianity. They don’t give these texts a fair reading, and too often, neither does Boyd. I repeat: “It serves to once again drive home the point that we ought not to read too much into passages that ascribe violent actions directly to God” (Boyd 2017: 864). If this is forgotten, it leads to:

A weak view of (the value of) the OT. Considering the amount of violence and nationalism condoned in the OT, it must be riddled with error if God is nonviolent. Measured by Boyd’s nonviolent cruciform hermeneutic, even several NT passages fall short (e.g. Boyd 2017: 557, 589ff; I assume Acts 5:1-11 is also disqualified, seeing Peter misuses his power against Ananias and Sapphira, much like Elijah calling fire from heaven in 2 Kings 1).

This does not encourage me to spend much time in the OT. Why would I study a passage that is a “terrible depiction of Yahweh,” reflecting “the twisted and culturally conditioned heart and mind of the biblical author and thus bears witness to the depths of depravity” (Boyd 2017: 719)?

The Christian community robs itself if it becomes overly concerned with violent passages and the questions they raise. Boyd often acknowledges that all Scripture is God-breathed, but let’s also remember to what purpose:

> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16f ESV)

There is a place to wrestle with violent portrayals, but this should not let us miss out on the deep value that is embedded therein. The OT is still the place where God speaks more clearly than anymore else except for the NT. This includes its violent portrayals.

Appendix: How Not to Read OT Imagery

I often found Boyd's exegesis of the OT lacking in sensitivity to the rich literary features that it contains. Here is a small sample as an illustration of this tendency and of his use of 'Aikido.'

> For example, using typical ANE imagery of a warrior deity, the psalmist says that Yahweh "will sharpen his sword" and "bend and string his bow" as he prepares "his deadly weapons" and makes "ready his flaming arrows" (Ps 7:12-13). This imagery would naturally lead one to expect Yahweh to descend from heaven and personally massacre people [Seriously? How would this work?]. The Cruciform Hermeneutic would thus require us to assume that "something else is going on," for this is obviously not consistent with the character of God revealed in the crucified Christ. Interestingly enough, however, the psalmist confirms our cruciform assumption [for which there is no need here because the author himself makes it perfectly clear that his imagery is indeed to be understood as – surprise – imagery] when he immediately goes on to describe how this warrior deity swings his "sword" and shoots his "flaming arrows."
>
> Those who are pregnant with evil
>
> conceive trouble and give birth to disillusionment.
>
> Those who dig a hole and scoop it out
>
> fall into the pit they have made.
>
> *The trouble they cause recoils on them;*
>
> *their violence comes down on their own heads*. (Ps 7:14–16, italics added)
>
> It is apparent that the culturally conditioned violent imagery of the divine warrior notwithstanding, God's sharpened sword and flaming arrows are nothing over and above the natural self-destructive consequences of people's own behavior. Whatever violence people experience when coming under the judgment of God is not something God extrinsically imposes on them. It is rather their own violence recoiling back on them. Like an Aikido master, God, in essence, judges violent wrongdoers by allowing these wrongdoers to punish themselves. As Schwager notes, throughout the OTL, "self-punishment and punishment at God's hands are not two distinct realities." This Aikido-like understanding of the effects of sin ricocheting back on the perpetrators permeates the OT. (Boyd 2017: 839; once again, if it "permeates the OT," it has little need of cruciform redefinition or correction)

Attribution

Warrior: Photo by Henry Hustava on Unsplash https://unsplash.com/photos/j_Ch0mwBNds

Vulcano: Photo by Yosh Ginsu on Unsplash https://unsplash.com/photos/qexZLgMcbPc

Dragon: https://pixabay.com/en/dragon-fantasy-monster-toy-game-855191/

Fire: https://pixabay.com/en/fire-wood-fire-flame-burn-brand-171229/

References

Boyd, Gregory (2017), The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press)

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

Disclosure of Material Connection: Some of the links in the post above are "affiliate links." This means if you click on the link and purchase the item, I will receive an affiliate commission. If you purchase anything through such a link, you help me cover the cost of Create a Learning Site.