The God of the Old Testament vs. the God of the New Testament

Influential thinkers such as Eric Seibert, Peter Enns, and Greg Boyd have given the impression that there is a wide chasm between representations of God in the Old Testament and the God Jesus perfectly reveals in the New—a God who is non-violent and loving. If someone issues commands to drive out the Canaanites or to engage in other forms of coercive force, this must be Moses or Joshua doing so because of their fallen, violence-prone, ancient Near Eastern cultural conditioning (the “textual” God rather than the “actual” non-violent, enemy-loving God). This talk will argue that “the kindness and severity of God” (Romans 11:22) are manifested in both testaments and that, despite discontinuities, important continuities also exist.

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1. Introduction

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. Three influential scholars:

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.”

Greg Boyd: Any acts involving coercive force (“violence”) in the OT cannot actually be divinely commanded (“thus says the Lord”) but this is the result of culturally-conditioned, fallen, sinful, violence-prone “prophets” (“thus says Moses/Joshua”). Jesus on the cross reveals the true “cruciform” character of God. God doesn’t directly punish or bring harm; he withdraws and demonic/human agents do their worst.

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.” The true (“actual”) God isn’t behind violence—only the “textual God” (a literary representation). 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. (2) “Virtuous violence” has been used to justify colonialism, ethnic hatred, abusing women: “The
Old Testament itself is part of the problem.” It absorbs much of the biblical writers’ own ancient Near Eastern [ANE] values/beliefs (ethnocentrism, patriarchy, divine 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”).

2. This “harsh”/“violent” OT God vs. the NT “loving Father” is not accurate.

a. 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.

b. 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.

c. Seibert’s negative comment that the church “grandly proclaims” the Bible to be God’s Word is rather unfair.

d. We must be careful not to appeal to Jesus’s authority selectively.

e. We must not ignore other NT affirmations of God as a severe judge (cf. Heb. 12:15-25).

f. Jesus and NT writers don’t actually read the OT “in a nonviolent way.”
g. “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).

h. There are differences in God’s dealings with his people under both covenants:

1) **Capital punishment is commanded in OT—in contrast to church discipline for God’s people in the NT for, say, adultery [1 Cor. 5].**

2) **God permits inferior moral conditions in the OT like patriarchy and warfare:** Mt 19:8: God meets people partway between the ideal and fallen reality. N.T. Wright compares the law to a booster rocket: “The Torah is given for a specific period of time, and is then set aside—not because it was a bad thing now happily abolished, but because it was a good thing whose purpose had now been accomplished” (*The Climax of the Covenant* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 181).

3) **The law is also dynamic and developing, with adjustments being made along the way.**

4) **“Covenant love” and “mercy” occur more commonly in the OT than the NT.**

5) **We see both greater love (in the cross) and more severe judgment in the NT.**

**Further Reading:**


Many operate under the assumption that the Old Testament God who commanded holy war and swallowed up the disobedient with fire and earthquakes, and then the God of the New Testament, a God of love, mercy, and grace. David Platt—Radical. The above statement made me curious and to be honest, a bit nervous. I’ve never thought of the God of the Old Testament as different than the God of the New Testament. I knew situations and people were different in the two Testaments, but my understanding has always been that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. To think the God I love could be different has made me hesitant.

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The Law. Here is where many Christians get confused. After Jesus’ death on the cross, we are now under a new covenant with God the Father. As stated above, no more animal sacrifices are needed to get forgiveness for our sins. However, there are verses in the New Testament that state that we are no longer under the law, but under grace. Old Testament vs. the New Testament. One common way this belief is stated is to claim that the God of the Old Testament is a god of wrath, whereas the God of the New Testament is a god of love. The God who pours out his wrath against sin in the Old Testament is the same God who will inflict the vengeance of eternal punishment on those who do not believe in his Son Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). At the same time, the God who in the New Testament is described as loving the world enough to send his Son for their salvation (John 3:16) is the same God who revealed himself to Moses as merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exodus. 34:6-7). The apostle John writes that Jesus the Christ is the Creator God of the Old Testament. John 1:1-3, 10 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. As a human the God of the Old Testament became a submissive human servant in the New Testament. It's in the Bible Mark 10:45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” NIV. Our Creator God has been closely associated with humanity throughout the whole Bible history just as He is anxious to be closely related to us personally. The God of the Old Testament is utterly unlike the God believed in by most practicing Christians. He is an all-too-human deity with the human failings, weaknesses, and passions of men but on a grand scale. His justice is, by modern standards, outrageous, and his prejudices are deep-seated and inflexible. Moreover, some of the challenges presented by the Old Testament portrayal of God may have to do with issues of language and analogy. For example, within the Old Testament, God is often described as jealous, frequently in the context of tales of the Israelites worshipping other gods. However, this is not meant to make God seem petty. God’s jealousy as it is described in the Bible refers to his burning love for his people.