

Synopsis by David Matthew of

# CROSS VISION

How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes  
Sense of Old Testament Violence

by Gregory A. Boyd

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*[Introductory note by D. Matthew:*

In recent times, several writers have tackled the fraught issue of how to reconcile the violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament with the non-violent approach taught and modelled by Jesus Christ, who is his 'exact representation'.

Greg Boyd seems to have come up with the definitive treatment of this topic in his two-volume, 1500-page work, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Fortress Press, 2017).

He wrote this with an academic readership in mind. To cater for the more standard reader, Boyd produced *Cross Vision*, a slimmed-down book on the same subject, and this is the one I am summarising here. Being slimmed-down does not mean, however, that it is a light or trivial work. You will need to read with an alert mind, a Bible to hand, and perhaps a willingness to put some of your hermeneutical preconceptions to one side!]

## Introduction: Something else must be going on

Boyd tells an imaginary tale about spotting his wife across the road in town one day. She approaches a beggar and violently assaults him. Boyd can't reconcile this with the caring and compassionate wife he knows so well. He has to conclude, therefore, that *something else is going on* that he is not aware of.

In a similar way, we Christians know the loving God revealed fully in Jesus Christ, and when we read OT accounts of God engaging in violent actions like the wholesale slaughter of Amalekites or Canaanites, we can't get our heads round it. So we have to conclude that *something else is going on* that we don't know about.

This book explores what it is. It uses the metaphor of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, in which Alice steps into an alternate reality where everything is reversed, as in a mirror. The cross of Jesus has a similar function in the way we will approach the OT violence-problem.

## Part 1

### The Problem and a Looking-Glass Cross Solution

#### Chapter 1: The Elephant

Christians tend not to talk about it, but there is an elephant in the room: how can we reconcile the violent God so often portrayed in the OT with the loving, compassionate and just God revealed in the person of Jesus? The OT is sometimes very ugly. E.g. The Israelites are to slaughter all the Midianites, but the virgin girls can be kept as the spoils of war (Num 31).

If God is OK with violence, maybe we can be, too? And it's no surprise that opponents of Christianity latch onto such passages to pour scorn on the faith as a whole.

Originally, Boyd set out to write a book *justifying* the violence of God, but he had to give up. Yet, on the authority of Jesus, he had to accept the inspiration of the OT. So he started again, on the premise that the OT's violent portraits of God are *not* compatible with the God revealed in the cross of Christ.

God's command to slaughter 'everything that breathes' appears no less than 37 times—and it means to carry out the slaughter as an *act of devotion* to the Lord! Moses was implicated in some of these, as was David. And the biblical authors believed they were complimenting God when they wrote that '*the Lord gave David victory*' etc. Divine violence appears also in the long list of those the Law required to be executed by burning or stoning, including fornicators, dishevelled priests and stubborn children.

Sometimes God himself *engages* in the violence rather than commanding others to do it for him: the Flood, the fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, Korah and his fellow-rebels, and poor Uzzah, who was only trying to be helpful. More examples are provided.

Clearly, *something else must be going on* behind the events themselves. Many have held this view in the past, including Origen. And they found *Jesus himself* to be the key to understanding it.

## Chapter 2: The Unveiling

Some say our view of God should be based on the *whole* Bible, not just the NT, or Jesus in particular. They are wrong; there is *progression*.

Jesus had a greater witness than John the Baptist (Jn 5:36), and John was greater than all the prophets before him (Mat 11:11), so Jesus carries more weight than the whole of the OT. Jesus himself taught that all the OT pointed to him. He alone is the 'exact representation' of God's being (Heb 1:1-3). Everything before him offered only glimpses of truth, while Jesus *is* the Truth. We believe the OT to be divinely inspired, but this doesn't necessarily mean it all reflects an unclouded vision of God.

Jesus is the 'looking glass' through which all Scripture must be interpreted. We must ask how the ugly portraits of God in the OT testify to Christ when interpreted through the looking glass of his life and sacrificial death. In him are hidden '*all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*' (Col 2:2-3). The rest of the Bible is not *another* source of wisdom and knowledge alongside him. '*All the fulness of the Deity*' lives in him in bodily form (Col 2:9); we don't need to supplement it from OT sources.

'No-one knows the Father except the Son,' he said (Mat 11:27). So we go only to him for insight. Paul and Hebrews use the 'shadow vs. reality' imagery. The OT events are simply a shadow—blurred and often confusing—of the reality that is in Christ alone. The shadow points to him; it doesn't *supplement* him. We see the Father in the Son alone (Jn 14:9), who is the Word of God: *the* Word. Only he—and not the OT portraits—has 'made him known' (Jn 1:18).

Jesus sometimes said things that overturned certain OT passages. E.g. 'unclean' food is no longer unclean (Lev 11 cf Mark 7:19). He flouted the Law by touching 'unclean' people. He relaxed the OT Sabbath rules. He stopped the adulterous woman from being stoned, subverting the law that required her death by this method. The OT required oaths to be made in God's name (Deu 6:13); Jesus said not to do it (Mat 5:34, 37). Jesus regarded the OT as *under*, not *alongside* his own authority.

When his disciples wanted to call down fire on some Samaritans (Luke 9), following the OT precedent of Elijah (2 Kings 1), Jesus turned it down, because Elijah's destructive miracle did not reflect the heart of the Father. He also rejected the *lex talionis*—'an eye for an eye'—insisting instead that we should not retaliate at all.

## Chapter 3: A Cruciform Through-Line

Boyd records a pastoral incident of a woman regularly beaten by her husband. She refused to leave him or press charges because, she said, 'He loves me.' A strange kind of love!

'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8). But what is love? It has been often misunderstood. Augustine believed it was right to imprison, torture or even execute heretics in the name of love. Not surprising, since he believed God's own love included predestining every atrocity in history, including predestining (in love) most humans to suffer in hell forever.

The NT does not give us a definition of love, just a supreme *illustration*: Christ's laying down of his life for us. And this, he adds, is the kind of love we must show to each other (1 Jn 3:16). Jesus became a *curse* for us (Gal 3:13), that is, estranged from God. This is the measure of God's love in Christ for us!

In his crucifixion he 'glorified' the Father's name (Jn 12:27ff)—that is, the Father's *character*. He showed God to be cruciform, self-sacrificing, in character. All Scripture is not just about Christ, but about Christ *crucified*. Paul, in Phil 2, says Jesus emptied himself, becoming obedient to death on a cross. The cruciform through-line marked his entire ministry: he refused the kingdoms of this world on the devil's terms, he washed the disciples' feet, and he refused to be the military Messiah the Jews expected. But it came to its clearest declaration at Calvary.

He reversed some OT patterns. In the OT, God's blessing was shown in wealth, power and security. But Jesus said the 'blessed' are the poor, hungry, weak and vulnerable. He taught that the Father's love is shown by sending rain and other blessings on the righteous and sinful alike. He loves indiscriminately, and so must we. He loved his enemies—in context, the Romans—and allowed himself to be killed by them.

He always stood in solidarity with 'sinners', and rejected the patriarchal pattern of his day by interacting with women. He approached Samaritans and Gentiles. All this is the same cross-pattern.

Paul, too, sees the cross as central. Opponents of the *gospel* are 'enemies of the *cross* of Christ' (Phil 3:18). He wanted to focus only on 'Jesus Christ and him *crucified*' (1 Cor 2:2). A disciple is one who has been 'crucified with Christ'. Like Jesus, Paul forbids retaliating against evil with evil. The cross is both the power and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:18, 24); it is the way God rules the world. Even many Christians have failed to grasp and believe this.

So now we have to ask how the macabre OT incidents of divinely-sanctioned violence reflect and point to the non-violent, self-sacrificial, enemy-embracing love revealed on the cross.

## Chapter 4: Revolting Beauty

Some treat the Bible like a cookbook: every recipe stands true in its own right, unaffected by the rest. We should not use the Bible that way, as a compendium of proof-texts. By contrast, in a detective novel, the *order* of events is crucial; sometimes an event near the end can reframe the meaning of everything that precedes it. The Bible is like that.

In the Bible, the 'surprise ending' is Jesus' death and resurrection. The Jews, on the basis of the OT, expected a military Messiah who would zap the Romans and make Israel the centre of everything, but the 'surprise ending' changed all that. It *reframes all of the OT*, including the violent portraits of God. There are four steps to understanding how this works.

1. **How the cross reveals God.** The Jews mostly saw the cross as a disaster for their hopes. But we Christians see it differently because we recognise that, behind the suffering, humiliation and death, *something else was going on*. We see God reconciling the world to himself through it. So the cross, while supremely ugly on the surface, is also to us supremely beautiful in what is going on behind. It's like a semi-transparent mirror. You see your own sinful reflection. But if what is behind is lit up, you see beyond your reflection to that instead. In the cross we see the ugliness of our own sin, reflected in the murder of Jesus, and, behind it, the beauty of God's stooping to save us.

2. **Reading Scripture with a cross-informed faith.** If the cross reveals what God is truly like, it reveals what he has *always* been like. He was like that when he inspired the OT. So we need to look at the ugly parts that show human sin and depravity, but also, by faith, look beyond that to discern something else going on behind the scenes, namely, God stooping down in love to bear the sins of his people and *thereby taking on the ugly appearance that reflects this sin*—just as at the cross.

So when Jeremiah shows the Lord as not letting mercy or compassion stop him from smashing families together to destroy them (Jer 13:14), we should view this ugly surface-appearance of God as reflecting Jeremiah's own fallen, culturally-conditioned, ugly concept of God. And the beauty side? By faith we see God stooping in love to suffer Jeremiah's limited, sinful concept of him. In this way 'violent divine portraits become literary crucifixes that bear witness to the historical crucifixion when interpreted through the looking-glass cross.'

3. **A cross-centred conception of God's 'breathing'.** In the beauty of the cross we see God *acting toward us* in stooping to save us. But in its ugliness we see God humbly allowing other agents, both human and satanic, to *act upon him*. We should look in the same way at his interaction with the OT writers.

We have normally assumed God's 'breathing' to be unilateral and unidirectional: him acting on the human authors. But the Bible, while beautiful in pointing us infallibly to Christ, is also full of ugly human imperfections. In the latter respect, it appears as foolish, weak and despised as did the cross. It reflects not just God's acting upon the human authors but also their acting on him in their far from adequate representations of him, including the OT's violent portraits, historical inaccuracies, contradictions and pre-scientific cosmology.

4. **The relational, non-coercive God.** God created us as free, decision-making persons, not as automatons. He does not coercively control us, which is why, in Scripture, he is often grieved, frustrated and disappointed with his creatures. But rather than giving up on us, he relates to us *as we are*. And that includes patiently bearing with our sins as he continues to influence us in the right direction. In light of this, it is no surprise that, in his 'breathing' upon the authors in the writing of Scripture, he at the same time is *acted upon* by them by allowing them their sinful conceptions of his character.

So, insofar as an OT portrait of God reflects his cruciform character, it reflects his *acting toward* people, breaking through their sin and cultural conditioning by his Spirit. We can call these *direct* revelations. And insofar as an OT portrait of God fails to reflect his cruciform character, it reflects his willingness to allow people's sin and cultural conditioning to *act upon him*. We can call these *indirect* revelations, in that we have to use our cross-informed faith to look behind the scenes and discern what else is going on.

## Chapter 5: Building on Tradition

Is this way of looking at the subject a novel one? No, it has historical precedents, though it does run counter to the general trend of the last 1500 years. It intersects with tradition in four ways:

1. **The tradition of finding the crucified Christ in Scripture.** Martin Luther emphasised the centrality of the cross. He declared the cross to be 'the key hermeneutical principle in understanding Scripture'. But his approach had limitations, in that he believed God to be the cause of everything, including evil.
2. **Looking beyond the surface meaning.** We should view Scripture through the cross and not be limited to the author's originally intended meaning. This is how the NT authors approached the OT, e.g. Matthew's treatment of Hosea's 'Out of Egypt have I called my son'. Limiting our view to the original author's intention is a product of the post-Enlightenment period (16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries), when the inspiration of the Bible was questioned. The original meaning remains important, of course, and we should stick with it unless we have reason not to. This is the *Conservative Hermeneutical Principle* that Boyd upholds. E.g. he holds that a Flood occurred and that it was a judgment of God, but at the same time believes the author had a fallen and culturally-conditioned view in portraying God as the agent who *caused* the Flood.

It is the *text* of Scripture that Jesus endorses as divinely inspired, not the relationship between the text and actual history. Some scholars believe the only way to come to terms with the OT violence passages is to affirm that they didn't really happen. But we are to treat events as 'real' insofar as that is how they are portrayed within the world of the biblical narrative. This is the approach that Christians brought to Scripture pre-Enlightenment.

3. **The relational nature of God's breathing.** All agree that God didn't override the biblical authors' personalities and styles. So his 'breathing' isn't unilateral. He also had to accommodate their cognitive limitations and cultural perspectives. Their portraits of him thus reflect, not the way God actually is, but the way he *appeared* to them with their limitations.

But we should not include within the category of 'accommodation' the passages that show God as changing his mind, feeling pain or emotion, or being affected by what people do. We reject the Greek-based traditional emphasis on God's alleged impassibility, immutability etc. We do not need to defend these so-called metaphysical attributes—e.g. his being above time and change—but instead defend his moral character as revealed in Christ. Novatian and other ancients took such a view.

4. **Progressive revelation.** There is discernible progress in God's self-revelation throughout the biblical narrative. Gregory of Nazianzus (4<sup>th</sup> c) taught that God allowed aspects of people's fallen culture to get mixed in with his self-revelation, because they otherwise would not have been able to handle it. So God cut off idols, but left the sacrifice system. He weaned them off the notion that God ate the sacrifices, but allowed them to believe he still enjoyed their 'pleasing aroma', etc. Boyd is in line with this kind of approach.

This is different, however, from the notion of progressive revelation taught by strict inerrantists, who are reluctant to concede that the OT writers were in any way lacking in their grasp of God's character.

Since the 5<sup>th</sup> century, ideas of progressive revelation have not been applied to the OT's violent portraits of God. This is because, with the conversion of Constantine, church and state effectively became one, and the church thus began to condone state violence, and even to make use of it. Indeed, they validated this position on the grounds of the OT portrayals of divine violence, which have been taken at face value ever since.

## Part 2

### Biblical, Historical, and Ancient Cultural Support

#### Chapter 6: The Heavenly Missionary

A missionary couple in the 1980s went to an isolated African tribe who practised female genital mutilation. This grim ritual had been embedded in the tribe's culture for centuries. As newcomers, the missionaries knew they were not in a position to demand that it be stopped, even though it grieved them immensely. So the tribespeople naturally (and wrongly) assumed the missionaries to be 'just like them'.

Instead, the couple began to gradually introduce better knives, anaesthetics and pain-relievers. They did this for three years, accommodating the barbaric practice until the tribe were ready to see for themselves that it was undesirable.

We could say the Bible is the inspired written witness to God's 'missionary activity' to this barbaric planet of ours. He works through loving influence rather than through coercion, accommodating people's fallen condition as much as necessary, even though it grieves him. And the OT people assumed he was 'just like them': violent, capricious etc. Here are four examples of how God accommodated them:

1. **Accommodations to God's marriage ideal.** This ideal was one man and one woman for life (Gen 2). But polygamy quickly showed up, and God never once condemned it, even in leaders like Samuel, David and Solomon. In fact, he would have given David *more* wives if he had behaved himself better (2 Sam 12:8)! God also

went along with concubinage. At that time, women not under a man's protection were very vulnerable, so it seems God accommodated the practice as doing less harm than insisting on sex only within marriage. Some men divorced their wives, so God went along with allowances for divorce and remarriage. And if remarriage is effectively adultery, God was permitting people to break one of the Ten Commandments!

God, then, is not an inflexible legalist. He realistically works with people in their fallen condition. And he does so graciously, not constantly reminding them that he is doing so. He lets them believe he is a typical Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) deity who approves of polygamy. This is his cross-attitude on display in OT times.

2. **Accommodating a human king.** God wanted to be his people's only king. But they wanted the perceived security of a human king, as was normal in ANE culture. So God acquiesced to their wishes and gave them one: Saul, and his successors. God graciously used and worked through these kings for his people's benefit. And even when a king made a mess of things, God didn't say, 'I told you so!'

In that culture, the gods were always seen as working through the kings. So the OT authors credit God with giving their kings the victory, including the most horrific violence. In the light of the cross, of course, we must question their interpretation of such events. They were people of their time.

3. **Accommodating animal sacrifices.** There was huge violence at the spiritual abattoirs in Israel. Read, for instance, how a dove or young pigeon had to be killed and prepared (Lev 1). The Lord is often said to find the aroma of their burning pleasing.

This was typical ANE thinking, and the practice of animal sacrifices was widespread in ANE nations long before Israel came on the scene. Most nations believed their gods ate the sacrificed animals. Some traces of this notion lingered in Israel (Num 28:2; Lev 21:8), but, for the most part, the OT authors did not go along with this, being satisfied with describing God as enjoying the aroma. God went along with the practice, and even used it to teach his people some important lessons about repentance and the consequences of breaking covenant—and to prepare the way for when he himself would become a sacrifice.

Later OT authors make it clear, however, that God actually despised the sacrifices! They had insights into God's nature that their predecessors had lacked. They saw that God loved animals, even including them in his covenants (e.g. Hos 2:18), and that he was saddened as the sacrificial system continued. And if he felt this way about the slaughter of animals, how much more did he feel the pain of the slaughter of humans!

4. **Accommodating the Law.** The whole Mosaic law was an accommodation on God's part, including the Ten Commandments, which include, for example, the ANE view that women are the property of men (and thus not to be coveted, just like a man's house or donkey). Hebrews says God was not pleased with animal sacrifices, even 'though they were offered *in accordance with the law*' (Heb 10:8).

Paul teaches that, from the start, God's purpose was for people to relate to him on the basis of *faith* (Gal 3:8). Why, then, was the Law given? As a temporary 'guardian', until Christ and faith in him (Gal 3:23-24). The Law simply pointed up our sin, rather than dealing with it. It was a mere shadow of the reality found in Christ, whose coming showed there was something 'wrong with the first covenant' (Heb 8:7) that rendered it 'obsolete' (8:13). Something else was going on behind it all, as Ezekiel and Jeremiah realised, as they spoke of a *new* covenant.

The depiction of the law, therefore, as a way by which people could be rightly related to God was an accommodation; God did not really operate on that basis. He did not really approve of the violence which was such an integral part of the Law, e.g. execution for relatively minor offences, and cutting off a woman's hand (Deu 25:11-12).

God stooped to accommodate his people's culturally-conditioned view of him as capable of giving such violent laws, without actually *giving* those laws. God didn't actually do it; his people wrongly assumed that he did. This is *indirect* revelation.

Any law, even though still barbaric, reflecting an *improvement* on the prevailing ANE laws reflects *God acting toward his people*, the work of his Spirit, breaking through with enlightening revelation. Any law, insofar as it *falls short of*



the character of God revealed in Christ and his cross, reflects the point at which the culturally-conditioned state of his people caused them to resist the Spirit, and where God stooped to allow his people to *act upon him*.

## Chapter 7: Rorschach God

The Rorschach ink-blot tests show that what people see is what they project from inside of them onto the object they are looking at. It is called *projection*. We project our desires, fears, etc. onto others. This is true of our relationship with God.

The Pharisees studied the OT but, because of the state of their hearts, failed to see Christ in it (Jn 5:39-42). Even the disciples experienced similar limitations: Jesus spoke of the Temple of his body, but they couldn't see beyond the building in Jerusalem. They also projected onto him their expectations of a military Messiah.

We can only rightly perceive God when our hearts are aligned with his *character*. The OT prophets portray the Israelites as 'stiff-necked', resisting God's will. They saw only glimpses of God's true character.

Men have always sought power over others, so they projected this idea onto God and saw him as being like that, which is why the cross appeared as 'foolishness'. Moses and Aaron, when asking Pharaoh to let them take a 3-day journey into the wilderness to worship God, added that, if they weren't allowed to do so, God 'may strike us with plagues or with a sword' (Ex 5:3). There is no record of God saying anything like this; it was their projection—more Al Capone than Jesus Christ!

At the same time, God *limited* his self-revelation to what his people could handle. He limited what Moses was allowed to see of his glory (Ex 33). And Jesus told his disciples he had more to tell them, but they weren't able to bear it at that time (Jn 16:12, 16).

But, in the midst of the violence, there are also many OT examples of God's Spirit breaking through to reveal the non-violent aspects of God's nature as revealed in Jesus and his cross. Isaiah 11 portrays a time when predators and prey will lie down together, reflecting the original vision of creation, where all animals were vegetarian. Micah brings his 'swords into ploughshares' vision, and the psalmists echo that (e.g. Ps 46:9).

God also encourages his people to trust in *him* rather than in their military capability (e.g. Ps 20, 33). If they had done so, there would have been no need for them to engage in violence. But they only got as far as trusting him to help them *use* their swords, not to the point of trusting him *instead of* them.

On two occasions, God's non-violent plans are sadly abandoned. One is Exodus 23:28-30. God promised, long in advance of the invasion of Canaan, to use the 'hornet' to drive out the inhabitants of the land 'little by little'. The other is Lev 18:24-25, where God says that, because of the Canaanites' sinfulness, the land would 'vomit them out' by becoming unfruitful, in sympathy with their moral unfruitfulness. Both strategies reflect a better, non-violent removal than military invasion. This is the Spirit of God at work, as there are no ANE parallels. But the Israelites followed the violent approach of conquest and extermination, along ANE lines, including crediting God with helping them do it. God had thus to bear the sin of his people's inability to rise above their cultural conditioning and trust him. What Moses 'heard' God say about the invasion reflected his own heart more than the heart of God.

Interestingly, apparently *only Moses* heard the 'slaughter' command. The Israelites believed him, but *we* don't have to. Would Jesus command such a thing? The command Moses 'heard' was 'under a curse', to use Paul's analogy with false gospels (Gal 1:8). How low God was willing to stoop to see his ultimate purposes fulfilled!

## Chapter 8: Echoes of a Pagan Warrior

How were the biblical authors influenced by their surrounding culture in the way they viewed God?

ANE peoples saw constant threats from *cosmic* enemies, often viewed as a personified *sea* that might swallow them up. They relied on their gods to prevent this happening. OT authors echo a lot of this language, sometimes quoting it from other nations' accounts almost verbatim, as in some Psalms. Sometimes the cosmic forces were seen as sea-

*creatures*, like Leviathan, Behemoth and Rahab. Several OT passages show God battling such monsters (e.g. Is 27:1). Such forces exist, and the NT describes them in terms of Satan and the ‘principalities and powers’.

ANE people did not distinguish between the sacred and the secular. Cosmic battles and human warfare were of one piece. Earthly battles are wrapped up in spiritual battles. A case in point is 2 Sam 5, where David’s troops matched the perceived heavenly ones: the sound of troops marching in the tops of the poplar trees’ (v24). Similarly, the Israelite captain Jephthah and his opponent, the Ammonite king, saw their respective gods as involved in the outcome of their conflict (Judg 11).

The OT people were right in believing that cosmic forces threatened them, and that God battles such forces on behalf of his people. But they were wrong in believing that, because of the cosmic-human connection, they could legitimately slaughter their human enemies in God’s name. The cross is our criterion for distinguishing between the two.

The OT also presents God as a warring mountain-top god, or as a storm-deity. All ANE people believed their warrior-god lived on top of a mountain. This is common OT language (e.g. Ps 3:4; 24:3-4). Zaphon, in Ps 48:1-3, was the most sacred mountain among the Canaanites, and the Israelite God is seen setting out to battle from there.

Common ANE imagery has the god descending from his mountain on storm-clouds, throwing lightning-bolts as arrows. Ps 18 fits this imagery throughout. It represents God’s accommodation of this culturally-conditioned thinking.

ANE deities are commonly shown as gloating over the way they have butchered masses of people, and the OT authors sometimes describe this, often with clear parallels with a particular Ugaritic goddess, Anat (e.g. Ps 58:10; 68:23). Both describe their god crushing enemies like grapes in a winepress and wading or dancing with the soldiers in their blood. Cannibalism, too, is often portrayed: the victors ate the flesh and drank the blood of their victims. This too reaches the OT, where God, in an only slightly-tempered way, is portrayed as ‘swallowing up’ his foes (e.g. Deu 32:42; Ps 21:9; Lam 2:2, 5; Ex 33:5). Then at times God’s Spirit breaks through to contradict this pattern, and has Israel’s enemies eating their *own* flesh (Is 49:26).

Does our interpretation outlined above imply that, in reality, God never actually judges people at all? No. The CHP would be violated, and Jesus himself referred to several violent OT judgments (the Flood, Sodom & Gomorrah, etc.), as well as prophesying the judgment about to fall on Jerusalem. So God sometimes *does* judge people. Indeed, the revelation of God on the cross was *itself a divine judgment*—and thus serves as a lens through which to view the other divine judgments. We can affirm that God justly judges sin while denying that he ever *acts violently* in the process.

## *Part 3*

### The True Nature of God’s Judgment

#### *Chapter 9: Divine Aikido*

In seeking to understand ‘what else is going on’ behind the portrayals of unChristlike violence, we need to consider the nature of God’s judgment, and the *way* he overcomes evil.

A woman, constantly abused, along with her children, by a violent alcoholic husband, eventually left him—for her own safety, and in the hope that his realisation of what he had lost would bring him to his senses and turn his life around. Sadly, it didn’t. The principle is: sometimes we have to let go of a loved one and let them suffer the consequences of their own self-destructive decisions.

We have all tended to assume that God judges the way we do: with violence. But, as the cross shows, God never needs to resort to violence to punish sin or overcome evil. Our belief that violence is unavoidable is behind the ‘wrath of God’ aspects of the penal substitutionary view of the atonement: that God vented on Jesus the violent



wrath due to us. It is a view with huge problems. E.g. forgiveness means *releasing* a debt, not collecting it from someone else.

But the main problem is ‘the myth of redemptive violence’, the notion that *violence can fix problems*. If, at the cross, God fixed the biggest problem with violence, we are surely free to solve lesser problems the same way? The introduction of this myth in the 11<sup>th</sup> century was followed by five centuries of non-stop, church-sanctioned violence. Before that, Jesus was seen as dying, not to free us from God’s wrath, but from Satan’s. This is the *Christus Victor* view, and doesn’t implicate God in any violence. God simply withdrew his protection, allowing wicked spiritual and human agents to do with Jesus as they wanted. He ‘gave him up’ or ‘delivered him over’ to them (Rom 8:32; 4:25). This ‘handing over’ concept is common in the NT. This divine abandonment was the cup of God’s wrath that Jesus freely chose to drink (Mk 14:36).

Jesus reveals that God is grieved when he has to turn people over to the death-consequences of their sin: ‘Oh, Jerusalem...’ (Mat 23:36-37). When God sees that his continuing mercy is just enabling people to continue in their sin, he has no choice but to ‘hand them over’ to suffer its consequences. This is the meaning of the divine wrath: not active smiting, but letting sin take its natural course.

And doing so grieves God, as the OT sometimes reveals (e.g. Jer 48:31; Mic 1:8; Hos 4:17; 11:8). This is the Holy Spirit breaking through. But cultural conditioning meant that, more often, OT authors failed to grasp that, and portrayed God as rejoicing in people’s downfall. As we see from the cross, God’s aim is always the redemption of the sinner, and this attitude, too, comes through in some OT passages, like Isaiah 19:22.

None of this means that, *whenever* people suffer, it is because they are being judged. This is true only of specified cases in Scripture.

If God judges sin by turning people over to its consequences, he *defeats evil* in the same way—an Aikido style of judgment. Aikido is a form of martial arts where you don’t respond to aggressors with aggressive force; you use techniques that turn every aggressive action back on the aggressor.

This is how God dealt with sin and evil at Calvary. Three factors need to be connected to see this. First, Satan entered into Judas and the Jewish leaders to have them plot Jesus’ crucifixion. Second, the demonic powers that recognised Jesus as the Son of God were mystified as to why he had come to earth. Third, Satan and the rebel powers failed to see God’s wisdom in causing them to bring about their own downfall. So God got the kingdom of darkness to orchestrate the very event that caused its own demise! He used evil to vanquish evil, Aikido-style.

This continues to be the way God punishes sin and overcomes evil.

## Chapter 10: Self-Punishing Sin

As a boy, Boyd began stealing music albums. After a long time, his father discovered it, raged at him, took away his record-player, and grounded him for a month. This is an example of *judicial* punishment: there was no *organic* connection between his stealing and the sanctions imposed on him. If, instead, his continual listening to over-loud rock music had ruined his hearing, in spite of warnings from his parents, this would have been an *organic* punishment.

The Bible generally construes God’s punishment of sin as organic in nature. He doesn’t *impose* it; the undesirable consequences are built into the sin itself. God just needs to withdraw and let the inevitable happen. His punishment, therefore, chiefly appears in Scripture as *divine abandonment*. This is the antithesis of the happy state of God being ‘with us’.

The Israelites saw God as their protector, using metaphors like ‘shield’, ‘fortress’, ‘rock’ and ‘refuge’. So when they came under threat from other nations, they saw it as God’s turning away from them and thus withdrawing his protection. See 2 Chronicles 12 for an example. This they saw as God’s wrath.

The OT does not have a word for ‘punishment’! The biblical language of judgment points to the natural *effects* of human sin, not to something imposed externally by God (many examples given). Sin, in due course, issues in death

(Jas 1:14-15). But the OT writers, with their cultural perspective, didn't always see this, and sometimes ascribed to God the *imposition* of punishment, just like other ANE deities.

In the NT the organic connection between sin and its consequences becomes clearer. When people rejected Jesus, he didn't chase after them but let them go. He didn't retaliate when insulted, or allow his disciples to call down fire on the Samaritans. As for the Temple, he said it would be 'left desolate' as God's presence simply left it. It thus became vulnerable, without God's protection, and fell to the Romans in AD 70. Humans destroyed it; not God.

Paul takes a similar line in Romans 1 when speaking of the wrath of God against sinners. Several times he states that God 'gave them over' to the consequences of their sin. In the same way, the church exercises discipline by letting the persistent sinner go, withdrawing the spiritual safety of its shelter so that *Satan* (not God) will 'destroy the sinner's flesh'. In treating persistent sinners this way, the church is 'binding' or 'loosing' what God in heaven is binding or loosing.

Three common questions about divine Aikido:

1. **If a nation (e.g. Israel) is certain to be judged by God, must not God control the agent (e.g. Babylon) that carries it out?** Otherwise, what if Nebuchadnezzar had decided to abandon his military assault? God takes the risk, but does not control. We see this in various OT cases where judgments did not unfold in quite the way God intended. In the above case, Neb did not withdraw, but he did go way beyond what God intended in the scale and viciousness of his assault (Zech 1:15). God doesn't micromanage his agents.
2. **Doesn't Aikido-style judgment imply an over-passive God?** Does God withdraw, then simply stand by and watch? No, God will continue to *influence* his agents, though always in a direction in line with his own cruciform character. He will not *cause* a Nebuchadnezzar to become bent on destruction.
3. **Are today's national defeats in war, or disasters, the result of God's withdrawing his protection?** We could ask the same about personal setbacks. No! Jesus rebuked people who suggested this (Luke 13:1-5; Jn 9:1-3). An affliction may, *on occasion*, reflect a divine judgment (Jn 5:14), but the NT emphasis is always on afflictions as the work of Satanic forces, and Jesus reveals *God's* will for them by *healing* them. So disasters and afflictions are simply the way things work out in a world where agents have free will, though God is always working to *influence* things to maximise good and minimise evil.

Even Bible passages that attribute violent actions to God himself usually provide clues that it was actually carried out by other agents already bent on violence, as we shall see.

## Chapter 11: Doing and Allowing

In a free-will world there is no guarantee that every story will have a happy ending. The wife who, with her children, left her abusive, alcoholic husband, did not see him sort himself out and return. He died in a drink-related car accident. And the dead man's father, at the funeral, accused the wife of killing him!

In the OT, authors, in line with ANE practice, often *credit* God with violent actions. But God is also sometimes made to look guilty of having *done* what he in fact merely *allowed*, because he had no better option. In both scenarios, there is usually some indication that it was in fact other agents that carried out the violence. For example:

1. **Who killed the Egyptian firstborn?** Exodus 12:12 suggests it will be God himself (indirect revelation, reflecting the author's cultural conditioning), but v23 attributes it to 'the destroyer' (direct revelation, as the Spirit breaks in), whom God would 'permit' to carry it out—which presupposes that the destroyer was already bent on destruction. God did not *make* him do it, or *command* him to do it. But the confusion, in this passage, between God's doing and his allowing is Scripture's *dual speech pattern*.
2. **Who is the merciless killer?** Jeremiah had the same problem distinguishing between God and Satan. He prophesied an impending violent judgment on Judah, having God say, '*I will smash them one against the other...*'

(13:14). This was his cultural conditioning speaking. In the light of the cross we must conclude that what God had in fact been saying was that, yes, he would judge Judah, and that *this would see people smashed* one against the other. And indeed, in a later reference to the same judgment (21:7) it is Nebuchadnezzar who will carry out the violent actions.

3. **Who crushes his virgin daughter?** In Lamentations, Jeremiah grieves over the inhabitants of Jerusalem after the Babylonian destruction of the city. He describes the Lord himself as crushing underfoot his 'virgin daughter Judah' in a winepress (1:15), and causing starving mothers to eat their own children (2:20; 4:4-10). God has slaughtered all the young men and women 'without pity' (2:21-22). But other passages show God as simply withdrawing his protection (e.g. 2:3, 7). And, in the light of the cross, we are to believe that it hurt God to see his people suffering this way. He humbly permitted himself to appear guilty of things that he in fact merely allowed.

The *dual speech pattern* is common throughout the OT. Here are five more examples:

1. In Deu 28:63, setting out the terms of the covenant, God promises to prosper his people if they obey him, and to 'ruin and destroy' them if they don't. But later, when God speaks to Moses, he says the disasters will be because he has withdrawn from them (Deu 31:16-18).
2. In Jer 33:5, God says that *he* will slay people in his anger, filling the houses with dead bodies. But then the Spirit of God breaks through, and we read that the situation will be because God has 'hidden his face' from the city (33:5) and given it into the hands of the King of Babylon (34:2). The people of Judah had wanted to be free from Yahweh, and now they were, with terrible results.
3. In Ezek 21:31a, God says he will pour out his wrath on Judah and 'breathe out my fiery anger' against them. But this is subverted in the very next sentence (21:31b) when he says, 'I will *deliver you into the hands* of brutal men'. He simply withdraws his protection.
4. In Jer 12:8, 12, God is portrayed, Anat-like, as a ferocious warrior who hates his own people and who says that his sword will therefore 'devour from one end of the land to the other'. But then Jeremiah has him saying that he will 'forsake my house' and 'give the one I love into the hands of her enemies' (v7).
5. In Jer 25: 30-31, 33, the prophets shows God as a warrior-deity who will 'put the wicked to the sword' and slay many. But then he shows him as a lioness who has abandoned its lair, leaving the cubs vulnerable to predators (25:38).

Such violent portraits of God bear witness to the cross when the violence is in fact carried out by *humans*. But what are we to make of the cases where God is portrayed as carrying out violence when *violent humans are not involved*, when there is no king or army 'bent on destruction'? Like the Flood, Sodom & Gomorrah, and the drowning of Pharaoh's army.

## Part 4

### Seeing Something Else through the Looking-Glass Cross

#### Chapter 12: Cosmic War

Boyd returns to the story of his wife assaulting a beggar on the street. It turned out the beggar was co-ordinating a terrorist attack on a government building. She had been co-opted by the authorities to grab his transmitter (in his cap) because she talked regularly to him and he would not suspect her when she approached him. The tactic was successful, and the plot was foiled. Boyd could now understand *what else had been going on* behind the puzzling events he witnessed. His wife's good character was vindicated.

With biblical events, many things only make sense when we recognise the *cosmic conflict* that is constantly going on in the background. When the violence God is portrayed as involved in cannot be ascribed to *human* agents, we must ascribe it to violent *cosmic* agents.

Jesus and the NT writers attribute a high degree of authority to Satan and rebel powers. Revelation, in particular, shows the whole of creation to be under that authority. And Jesus didn't dispute the devil's claim to ownership when he offered to give him 'all the kingdoms of the world'. Jesus three times calls Satan the 'prince of this world'. God may be the *ultimate* ruler, but Satan is the *functional* ruler. See 1 Jn 5:19; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2. The NT commonly calls these ruling forces the 'principalities and powers', and they are able to corrupt aspects of nature, including health (Acts 10:38). All is under their influence; there is no neutral ground. The cross was Jesus' victory over these evil forces (Col 2:14-15).

Because these forces, like gravity, are always at work, God only has to stop preventing them doing what they do, for bad things to happen. And this is all God ever did.

**Korah's rebellion** in Num 16 is a case in point. The earth opening up, the falling fire, and the plague on the subsequent grumblers, were all the doing of the cosmic forces of evil, who rushed to do their evil thing once God's restraining hand was withdrawn. Paul agrees (1 Cor 10:10). He in line with a movement, strong in his day, that felt uncomfortable with ascribing violent judgments to God and blamed them instead on fallen angels, and three Jewish authors before Paul had attributed the Num 16 judgment to such beings.

ANE people did not distinguish between the spiritual and material worlds as we do. So Num 16 says that '*the earth* opened its mouth and swallowed them'—it was seen as a cosmic monster that could swallow people. And some Canaanites believed in a death-God named Mot who lived just below the earth's surface, with jaws that could reach up and swallow people. God accommodated this ancient worldview in stooping to deal with the book's author. We may today question the 'weird' aspects of this, but must still acknowledge that the demonic forces portrayed in this way are very real.

We can take the same approach with the falling fire and the plague. These, too, were the natural work of evil cosmic agents bent on stealing, killing and destroying.

Paul doesn't specifically say in 1 Cor 10:10 that the judgment of grumblers by a 'destroying angel' was Korah's rebellion. It may be a broader allusion to the several OT cases where a similar thing happened. We are justified in attributing all of them to the evil cosmic forces as God withdrew his hand of restraint.

## Chapter 13: Creation Undone

Here we look at **the Flood** in Noah's day.

Though the OT uses global language, most agree that the Flood was a regional disaster. But the narrative—which is what is inspired, and what we are dealing with—is clear: God wiped out every living thing except the remnant in the Ark. Once again, since no human agent was involved, we must assume that *evil cosmic agents* were behind it.

Four Scripture-based considerations support this cross-centred reading of the narrative.

1. **As humans go, so the earth and animal kingdom goes.** The Bible consistently depicts the earth and animal kingdom as directly influenced by the human condition. There is an organic connection. This includes the NT, where Paul says that, once humans enter into the fulness of their liberation in Christ, the rest of creation will follow (Rom 8). When famine and drought bite, for instance, God doesn't have to cause it; it happens automatically because the humans are failing. We should view the Flood this way.
2. **From corruption to destruction.** The Flood account several times links human corruption with the destruction of the earth (e.g. Gen 6:12-13). God's Spirit had restrained 'the deep', and when that restraint was removed, destruction of the earth followed inevitably. And because children, animals and the earth were bound up with the welfare of their God-commissioned rulers, when those rulers—God's human viceregents—became corrupt,

these suffered with them.

3. **The agents of destruction.** While the author 'credits' God with the destruction, he never actually depicts God bringing it about. He says things like, 'The floodwaters came...', 'the rain fell...', 'the flood kept coming...' These were the instruments of the one who has been 'a murderer from the beginning'.
4. **The Flood and the undoing of creation.** The language of the Flood parallels, in reverse order, the creation account in Gen 1. In particular, the separation of the waters was reversed. God's restraint on 'the deep' was lifted, and it automatically reverted to its prior chaotic state. Similarly, the stages of re-ordering things after the Flood also echo the creation order of Gen 1.

There are several ANE accounts of a major flood, in addition to the Genesis one. Comparing the latter with the others, one can perceive two ways in which God's Spirit breaks through to point to the true nature of God.

1. In the non-biblical accounts, it is for petty reasons, like spite or rage, that the gods send a flood. In the Gilgamesh epic, Enlil sent the flood because humans had become too noisy, and he was annoyed by it! But the biblical author captures God's grief in seeing the need for the judgment to take place (Gen 6:6). He was 'heartbroken'. This echoes Jesus' words over Jerusalem: 'Oh, Jerusalem, how often...but you would not.'
2. Motive is another difference. Non-biblical accounts all put the flood down to the god's rage. But Genesis shows God reluctantly permitting it, and with sorrow, after centuries of trying to turn humans down a better path. Also, it is not just to punish them; it is to *rescue God's creation project*. The unnatural sexual relations that had produced the Nephilim were contrary to God's intended order. Also, both Hebrews and 1 Peter highlight the *salvific* rather than the punitive nature of the Flood.

## Chapter 14: Dragon-Swallowing-Dragon Warfare

Here we look at the **deliverance and drowning at the Red Sea**.

The author of Exodus, a product of his culture, 'credits' God with being a 'man of war' (15:1) who drowned Pharaoh's army. But we know from the cross that this is not how God operates. No human agents were involved so, once again, we should see evil cosmic forces as being at work. We have noted how, in ANE thinking, waters were identified with those destructive forces.

Scholars have shown that the common ANE 'conflict with chaos' motif is behind the Red Sea account. When God parted and closed the Red Sea it was a re-enactment of his battle with the anti-creational force that he defeated in creating the world. Certainly, every OT mention of it after Exodus explicitly uses that kind of terminology. Ps 74, for instance, refers to Leviathan in this connection. Ps 77 is similar: God's victory was more over the writhing waters than over Pharaoh's troops.

Isaiah 51 links the Red Sea to another monster: Rahab. And in Hab 3:15 God tramples the sea—Hebrew *yam*, which is also the name of a Canaanite chaos-deity. It was thus the sea monster, not God, who devoured Pharaoh's army. There is Aikido-type action here, too. God restrains Pharaoh's army with the pillar of fire, then removes it, allowing Pharaoh to do what he was bent on doing. He also restrains the sea-monster so that the Israelites could pass through, then withdraws his restraint, allowing the monster to do what it wanted to do all along. All these evil powers we now know as Satan.

God can play off one evil force against another. Egypt and Pharaoh are shown to be one such force, who had boasted, 'I will gorge myself' on the people of Israel. But it became the food on which another such force, the Red Sea, gorged itself. One serpent, we could say, swallowed another. It is not coincidental that the account of Aaron's serpent swallowing those of the Egyptian magicians precedes the Red Sea account.

'Serpent' (Hebrews *tannin*) in Ex 7:12 does not mean an ordinary snake. It can be 'dragon' or 'monster', and is the word used to describe the anti-creational monster of the sea that God split apart and used both to save his people and to defeat the Egyptian army.

This 'dragon swallowing dragon' motif also covers the account of the plagues on Egypt. Each plague was a localised step in the undoing of the order of creation, as some feature broke out of its God-appointed limits. All God had to do was stop restraining the forces of destruction. Destroying angels were responsible for *all* the plagues, not just the last one (Ps 78:49). In this psalm we also have the 'giving over' to destruction kind of language we noted earlier.

The narrative tells us that God's conflict was also with 'the *gods* of Egypt' (Ex 12:23). There is a case for holding that each plague was an assault on a particular god. So we have another 'swallowing' episode: God allowed the destroying agents behind the ten plagues to swallow up the ten chief gods of Egypt.

God always grieves when people suffer, and this is no exception. The account's author shows no sympathy for the Egyptians at all, as we would expect. We know from the revelation in Christ that God grieved over every firstborn lost and every drowned soldier. And their destruction by no means suggests that they will be lost forever. When the Corinthians handed the adulterous man over to Satan 'for the destruction of the flesh', it was so that his 'spirit' may be 'saved on the day of the Lord' (1 Cor 5:5).

We have seen God bringing judgments through human and cosmic agents. Next, we look at the accounts of his performing violent miracles through *his servants*, like Elisha, Elijah and Samson.

## Chapter 15: Misusing Divine Power

When exceptional authority is given to someone, there is no guarantee they will use it wisely. This extends to supernatural authority given by God to people like Elisha, Elijah and Samson.

Jesus was truly God and truly man. As a man, he had a human will that needed to be submitted to his Father, as we see in Gethsemane, where this was severely tested. He became 'obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross' (Phil 2:8). Christ is thus not just the supreme revelation of *God's* character, but also of *human* character. God entrusted everything to Jesus' power (Jn 13:3) and, technically, Jesus could have used his authority in ways that conflicted with the Father's will. Two of the three desert temptations were along those lines, but he refused them both.

Moses was not the same. God entrusted him with the 'staff of God', to be used only as God directed (Ex 4:20-21). Mostly, he did this. But in Num 20 he struck the rock with it, contrary to God's wishes. But the water gushed out just the same, even though used in a sinful way.

Paul takes a similar line with spiritual gifts. Those with supernatural gifts are to use them 'in a fitting and orderly way' (1 Cor 14|:40), implying that we might use them in less acceptable ways. Such power-abuse mistakes were made in the OT, and this is yet another way in which we are enabled to see *what else is going on* behind some violent portraits of God there.

**Elijah** twice called down fire from heaven that devoured innocent Samaritan men (2 Kings 1). The author assumes that God committed this violence, but we now know better. We know that because Jesus forbade his disciples from doing something similar (Lk 7:51-56); it did not reflect the character of the 'Father in heaven'. If this kind of action was not in fact God's way, we can only assume that Jesus viewed it as being the devil's way.

The context tells us that it was 'fear' that motivated Elijah's action. On the third occasion, the 'angel of the Lord' intervened to prevent it happening again and to show that the prophet's fear was unfounded. And Elijah clearly lacked trust in God, who, just before, had showed him on Mount Carmel that there was no need to fear rebellious rulers.

In ANE thinking, fire from heaven was attributed to malevolent, fire-throwing deities. It's interesting that, in Rev 13:13, fire from above is associated with demons. So Elijah, we conclude, misused his supernatural authority.



It is much the same with **Elisha** and the bears who mauled some boys who had mocked him as ‘Baldy’ (2 Kings 2:23-24). It was bad, even when we recognise that the word for ‘boys’ more likely indicates young men in their twenties, and that, at that period, baldness was often associated with being cursed or mentally challenged—they probably saw Elisha this way because of his message of exclusive devotion to the Lord.

But did God send the mauling bears? Nowhere does the text say so explicitly, even though Elisha cursed the boys ‘in the name of the Lord’. It is the prophet’s own powerful word that either ‘heals and gives life’ or ‘brings death’ (2 Kings 2:19-22, 24). And all the accounts of Elisha and Elijah were written to highlight, not primarily God’s activity, but the extraordinary power at these men’s disposal.

In ANE thinking, demonic forces were often associated with wild beasts. These two bears, therefore, may have represented the forces unleashed by Elisha’s protection-removing curse—certainly that would help explain how they managed to kill 42 of the boys. Jesus sacrificed himself for the sake of others; Elisha did the opposite, sacrificing others for his own benefit.

**Samson**, too, is in this category of misusing authority divinely given. He used his power in vengeful, selfish ways on many occasions—for instance, murdering 30 innocent men for their clothes, to pay off a debt, and running berserk with an ass’s jawbone and killing 1000 Philistines. He was immature in other ways, whining like a toddler (Judg 15:18) and being foolish in his relations with women.

Whether or not the incidents actually took place or are in the genre of folklore or legend makes no difference: we have to explain the *narrative* that is part of the inspired record. It is amazing that God would stoop to work through such an immature and foolish man as Samson. But Samson does certainly not mirror God’s character as revealed in Jesus and the cross.

Nowhere does the author show Samson seeking God’s direction regarding the use of his strength. He used his discretion to employ the power in selfish and foolish ways. And even the possession of that power, being related to the length of his hair, as it was, was in Samson’s control. He lived by violence, and he died by violence (Mat 26:52). His use of power tells us nothing about God’s true character.

## Chapter 16: Commanding Child-Sacrifice

We all find the killing of children—especially one’s own children—unacceptable. Yet it seems that God asked Abraham to do just that. He was to kill his only son Isaac (Gen 22).

Child sacrifice was commonplace in the ANE, so it is not surprising that God’s people found themselves pulled in that direction. This is apparent in that there were frequent scriptural prohibitions of the practice. In spite of that, at least three passages seem to show God requiring his people to sacrifice their firstborn, including the Abraham incident.

Paul Copan has written about it at length. It was, he says, not just a test of Abraham’s obedience to God, but also about assessing his trust in God’s faithful character—trusting that God would keep his promise about the future blessings to come through Isaac. God wanted Abraham to trust that he would *not* need to destroy his son, despite the command to the contrary. The tone of God’s conversation with him tends to confirm this. And Abraham told the servants that, after the sacrifice, he and Isaac would return down the mountain to them, even if that came about through God’s raising Isaac from the dead (Heb 11:17-19).

But the command is still barbaric, hardly justified by a claim to faith-testing. And if Abraham’s trust in God was as strong as Copan claims, why did he need testing on it anyway? The text, on the contrary, suggests that something genuinely hung in the balance here (‘*now I know that you fear God...*’, v12). Maybe the pull of Abraham’s ANE background was still strong.

The text also suggests that it was not just a test to *find out* if Abraham trusted God, but one that would *help* him trust him. God, it seems, for a moment stooped to take on the appearance of a typical ANE child-sacrifice-demanding deity: he actually gave the command. This was the only way God could forcefully convince Abraham that he was different from the other gods, producing a paradigm-shift in his thinking. There are three steps in this argument.

1. **Abraham voiced no objection to God's command.** Compare this with his indignation earlier at God's threat to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18). In Abraham's background, child sacrifice had been routine. And not until Sinai, centuries later, was it revealed that God was revolted by it. So God wanted to remove any lingering suspicions in Abraham's mind that he was like other ANE gods.
2. **God had used this kind of strategy before.** When no son of promise was born to Abraham and Sarah, they took steps to see the promise fulfilled *their own way*, via Hagar. ANE deities were always perceived as needing humans to work with them to accomplish things and thus to receive divine blessings. Even after Ishmael arrived, it was another 13 years before God delivered on his promise. He was *taking them to the edge*, showing them that the promise would be fulfilled through God's power alone. This is reflected in the name-change that God gave them both. Paul's treatment of Abraham in the NT confirms this general approach.
3. **Child-sacrifice was, in ANE thinking, the ultimate proof of loyalty.** God had to meet Abraham where he was, in order to get him where he wanted him to be, with all lingering pagan concepts swept away. The relief when God intervened to stop the killing must have been overwhelming. God had had to push him to the edge to teach him a vital lesson about what he was truly like. God doesn't *require* sacrifice; he *provides* it! This we see in its fulness at Calvary.

We all need to face this issue: *will we trust God's loving character even when he appears to be acting in ways that contradict that character?* This becomes an issue every time we read an OT account which portrays him as violent.

## Postscript

Boyd tells of a woman who approached him after he had preached along the above lines. The relief she felt, with tears, indicated the massive reservations she had held about trusting God as the Bible as a whole presents him, if we give it a 'flat' reading where every part carries the same weight. Our mental concept of God will frame every aspect of our lives.

The paradigm-shift taught in this book means that, even if we gladly embrace it, there will be times when our thinking tends to slip back into the old ways. When that happens, there are four things to hold on to:

1. The primary thing is to remain confident that *only* Jesus' cross-centred life and ministry reveal what God is truly like. Keep coming back to this!
2. At times, this view may seem *too good to be true*. But it *is* true. Indeed, God is in reality even more beautiful than this view shows him to be.
3. Remember that the ugly portraits of God in the OT reflect the ugliness of our own sin that Jesus bore on the cross. God stoops to bear our ugly sin and thereby to take on ugly appearances that mirror that sin.
4. Cultivate and deepen your relationship with the God revealed at Calvary. Fellowship often with Jesus in prayer and meditation on his person. Surrender your imagination, with its mental pictures, to the influence of the Holy Spirit. Do this often!