God finds us, still

Christocentric hermeneutics without violence

Melissa Florer-Bixler

Anabaptists share a general consensus that Jesus is the hermeneutical key for our understanding of the Bible.[1] Menno Simons attests to this understanding when he writes that "all the Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, on every hand, point us to Christ Jesus, that we shall hear him."[2] Anabaptist readers of the Bible often refer to this as a *Christocentric* reading of Scripture. But the question remains: Which Christocentrism?

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In this essay I explore two Christocentric hermeneutics as a way to understand how differing a priori commitments shape our doctrine of God in its relationship to interpreting Scripture. The first Christocentric hermeneutic I discuss is that of neo-Anabaptist pastor Greg Boyd. Boyd argues that the sinful people who record history in the Old Testament obscure the true character of God, instead passing down to others a tarnished and distorted ethic. I then contrast Boyd's approach with that of Reformed theologian Karl Barth. For Barth, the Father is known in the Son but neither more "fully" in the New Testament than the Old; Scripture as a whole bears truthful witness to the Word of God. Utilizing Barth's premise that the whole Bible is reliable for transmitting faith, I conclude by propose an alternative framework for grappling with the violence of the Bible with the aid of Michael Fishbane and Ellen Davis. Their scholarship offers insight into the way the reception tradition shaped an internal critique as Scripture was passed down through generations.

1 See Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000), and J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

2 Menno Simmons, *The Complete Works of Menno Simons* (Elkhart, IN: Funk, 1871), 85.

Boyd's deceiving God

To evaluate Greg Boyd's Christocentric hermeneutic, I'm utilizing his popular-level book *Cross Vision*. I consider Boyd's argument for this essay because it has become prolific in the Mennonite church and has been adopted by many as an Anabaptist biblical hermeneutic. Boyd's central question is this: How do we make sense of the violent God we meet in the Old Testament (OT) in light of our belief in the nonviolent love of Jesus revealed in the New Testament (NT)? While Boyd affirms that the same God is at work in both parts of the Bible, he begins by contrasting the witnesses of the OT and NT. While the people of the OT only grasp "glimpses of God's true character," the people in the NT see God fully because Jesus's revelation offers "radical superiority" over all other revelations of God.[3]

Boyd affirms that the God of the OT is the same as the God of the NT, but in order to maintain this unity and eradicate the violence attributed to God in the OT, Boyd posits that in the first part of the Bible we encounter a God who withdraws from Israel. God will "adjust his revelation to the low spiritual condition of the people"—by implication the Jewish people.[4] Only when people "are ready"—that is, have ethically progressed beyond the tendencies of genocidal violence—does God reveal God's self in Jesus.

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At times, Boyd is willing to concede that God's actions include allowing harm to come to God's people through war, famine, and exile. Boyd explains that this violence results from God removing God's self-protection and allowing for other agents to act as punishers. When overt violence in the text cannot be attributed to a secondary agent (such as Nebuchadnezzar or an angel), Boyd's cruciform hermeneutic makes the writer the author of the violence.

Boyd lays the bulk of the blame for God's violent nature recorded in the OT at the feet of its writers. Like a Rorschach test, we see ourselves

3 Greg Boyd, *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 25, 105.

4 Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 109.

when we look at God. The Jewish people—stiff-necked, crooked, and perverted—transfer this image onto the God of Israel. Boyd writes,

> *Since we know that God's people in the OT times were generally stubborn, had no real knowledge of God, and tended to make God in their own twisted image, should we be surprised to find God sometimes being depicted in twisted ways in the God-breathed record of his missionary activity? To the contrary, I think we should be surprised that we find so many depictions that aren't twisted, as assessed by the criterion of the crucified Christ.*[5]

The Bible tells us more about the Jews of the OT than it does about God. As readers of the Hebrew Bible (or Christian OT), we see a "culturally conditioned portrait of God," shrouding the true character of God, which will only be fully revealed as nonviolent in the life of Jesus Christ.[6]

For Boyd, God allows "fallen and culturally conditioned people to affect the results of his breathing his word" because God's commitment is to the freedom of humans.

For Boyd, this way of reading the Bible resolves any apparent contradiction arising from two pre-commitments he brings to the text: (1) an *infallible* Bible, the view that the whole Bible can be trusted as a guide for faith that will not lead astray because the Bible does what it is intended to do (point us to Jesus), and (2) a *nonviolent* God, the view that God does not cause physical harm or destruction to humans—a deduction Boyd reaches from observing Jesus's nonviolent life and self-surrender. From these two a priori obligations, Boyd constructs a doctrine of God that determines how we read the Bible.

For Boyd, God allows "fallen and culturally conditioned people to affect the results of his breathing his word" because God's commitment is to the freedom of humans.[7] God respects the decisions of people to follow God or to participate in their own self-destruction. As such, "God allowed the sin of humanity to *act upon him* and to condition the way he appeared"—both on the cross and in the OT.

5 Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 107.

6 Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 108.

7 Boyd, *Cross Vision*, 57.

When we extend this doctrine further, however, problems emerge. In Boyd's rendering, God allows Israel to pass down a destructive and violent image of God to other humans who, for thousands of years, pattern their lives after this destruction. If we are to take Boyd seriously, then the Jews who worship the God of the Tanakh (the Hebrew shorthand for what Christians call the OT) are worshipping a false god—their own sinful reflection. The Hebrew Bible deceives and malforms Jews, past and present. God's decision to allow divine freedom to the authors of the Bible is a deception for all those who read the OT prior to the coming of Jesus, when we finally have the criteria to distinguish the true character of God from a tainted cultural product.

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Even at this cost, Boyd is unsuccessful at exonerating God from violence. Boyd limits his conception of violence to direct, physical violence, despite the Anabaptist conviction that violence extends beyond direct physical harm to another person. Violence is racism, misogyny, and destruction of the environment. Violence can be passive as well: standing to the side while allowing others to enact harm or failing to prevent harm from occurring when we have the power to do so. Throughout *Cross Vision* we meet a God who designs a system where "he" can punish, harm, and destroy through secondary agents. Boyd's God participates in passive but witting violence.

Rather than revealing God's self, Boyd's God wears a mask to hide from the readers of the Bible. We, as Christians with access to Jesus, are given the task of sorting out which places in the OT conform to cruciform criteria and which do not. We become Scripture's judge. We are left to wonder why Christians should read the OT at all if it contains deceptive—or at best suboptimal—information about God's character. And why should we trust a God who allows humans to pass along a distorted image of God's self to millions of people for millennia?

Barth's divine freedom

Though Boyd credits Karl Barth for his Christocentric hermeneutic, the two have significant and irreconcilable differences. For Barth, because Jesus is God, the OT is a faithful and truthful witness to God. Both the

prophets of the OT and the apostles of the NT testify to God indirectly, as secondary witnesses to the Word of God (in contrast to Boyd who claims the NT as a direct revelation of God in Jesus). Revelation is never directly perceptible as an object. Nevertheless, God does not cease bearing witness to God's self.

For Barth, the indirect witness of the Bible does *not* obfuscate God's character, as the sinful recording of the Tanakh obscures God for Boyd. Instead, the Bible is a witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, given to human authors and relayed through their words and thoughts, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Barth argues that the attempt to discover something infallible in the Bible is "mere self-will and disobedience."[8] The prophets and apostles were witnesses to God, and in their written word "they again live before us. . . . In all the concreteness of their own situation and action they speak to us here and now."[9] We search the Scriptures for this witness, "but we are completely absolved from differentiating between the divine and the human, the content and the form, the spirit and the letter. Always in the Bible as in all other human words we shall meet them both."[10] For this reason, Barth does not dwell on violence in the Bible. He acknowledges that the Bible contains violence on every page because it is not exempt from the fallibility of human authors, including the apostles' accounts of the life of Jesus.

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Barth affirms a material distinction between the testaments, including answers we could not reach without Jesus's intervention (such as Jesus's teaching on the accommodation of divorce). But, for Barth, the Bible is unified in its testimony to both God's grace and God's judgment. Barth writes, "It can and must be maintained that the Old Testament as a whole forms a single material context. . . . We are forced to affirm convergence rather than divergence, harmony rather than contradiction, once we see

8 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 531. Hereafter *CD*.

9 Barth, *CD* I/2, 508.

10 Barth, *CD* I/2, 531–32.

the focal point which is outside the Old Testament and identical with the central point of the New."[11] The NT writers make these connections clear, and the cross testifies to the grace of judgment. Grace and judgment are not oppositional characteristics of God but reveal one another: "God is holy because His grace judges and His judgment is gracious."[12] The difference between the testaments is a matter of orientation, not revelation. The first part of the Bible is expectation; the second is recollection.

I suspect Barth would be skeptical of Boyd's self-assurance is his ability to parse out which parts of Scripture reveal God's character and which do not. Barth shares no such confidence in the human capacity to judge the Bible:

> *It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham's spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ. It is this which is within the Bible.*[13]

The Bible confronts *us*, the readers or hearers, and in this confrontation we find comfort and consolation.

While Boyd's a priori ethical and evangelical hermeneutics lead him to construct a doctrine of God, Barth's theology takes the inverse approach. If we seek the Bible to find morality and ethics that match with our particular ideas about violence, we will be disappointed. When it comes to morality, "the Bible is grievously wanting," writes Barth.[14] People seeking inspiration or comfort will quietly close their Bibles after seeing what is on the pages. Our questions—such as *What do we do with violence in the OT?*—go unanswered. "Time and again," writes Barth, "the Bible

11 Barth, *CD* II/1, 17.

12 Barth, *CD* I/2, 359.

13 Barth, *CD* I/2, 43.

14 Karl Barth, "The Strange New World of the Bible," in *A Map of Twentieth-Century Theology: Readings from Karl Barth to Radical Pluralism*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 25.

gives us the impression that it offers no instruction, counsel, or examples whatsoever. . . . It offers not at all what we first seek in it."[15]

Barth cannot stand in judgment over any particular part of Scripture. He writes, "We have to subordinate ourselves to the word of the prophets and apostles; not as one subordinates oneself to God, but rather as one subordinates oneself for the sake of God and in love and fear to the witnesses and messengers which He Himself has constituted and empowered."[16] The theological reliability of Scripture comes from two aspects of this revelation. The first is Jesus made known (objectively) to the apostles (subjectively). The second "act" is the uncompleted revelation of the reader or hearer of the Bible to know God through the Scriptures. We never possess this revelation. We receive it as a gift.[17]

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Critical traditioning as Anabaptist hermeneutic

What does all this mean for us, the readers or hearers, in the work of discerning and interpreting Scripture? If we read the Bible as if our life depends on it, how do we maintain that Scripture is the work of fallible humans while, at the same time, avoiding Boyd's posture of standing in judgment over the Bible?[18]

In this final section, I attend to Barth's doctrine of God as we encounter the Scriptures while turning toward the discernment of the Bible that is required of us. I begin with a different a priori assumption than Boyd. The Bible confronts us with the call to make a decision: Will I entrust myself to this God? The miracle of Scripture is that we reach this point of decision in the midst of the humanness of the Bible—its incessant

15 Barth, "Strange New World," 25.

16 Barth, *CD* I/2, 531.

17 Barth, *CD* I/2, 717, from Christina Baxter, "On the Nature and Place of Scripture," in *Theology beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth*, edited by John Thompson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1986), 35.

18 Barth's own attempts at an ethics of war and peace are notably unsatisfying and inconsistent, in particular his rending of the command against killing. See John Bowlin, "Barth and Werpehowki on War, Presumption, and Exception," in *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth's Ethics*, edited by Daniel L. Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 94.

wars, its misogyny, its cultural moorings. None of this is able to block God from encountering people.

Ellen Davis writes that the inherent tension of the Bible is that the human character is both necessary and secondary.[19] The Bible's aim is not to teach ethical lessons or provide an account of history. And when we are caught up in working the Bible out toward these ends, or rescuing the Bible from itself, we have lost the purpose and the power of the witness of God to us in the covenantal history of Israel, a blessing to all nations, down to the present.

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The Bible bears witness to a tradition that, from time to time, the biblical writers no longer found edifying. Contra Boyd, who treats the Bible as a singular product, the Bible—formed over thousands of years—presents an internal tension as biblical writers through time struggled to "preserve and pass on what they received as authoritative, while at the same time they registered for their own and future generations profound changes in the understanding of faith."[20] This tension is what Michael Fishbane calls "an inner biblical exegesis."[21]

Multiple communities, authors, and redactors introduce their own interpretations into the text, often in ways that stand in direct opposition to the tradition passed down to them. Attentiveness to the internal structures shows how the communities responded to the ethical demand of the text not by excising the tradition but instead by offering additional information and narratives. Transmission was also interpretation. Ellen Davis writes that "the inference would seem to be that faithful transmission of authoritative tradition must always be something more than rote repetition."[22] It is because the tradition has authority that it requires mod-

19 Ellen Davis, "Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic," *Anglican Theological Review* 82 (Fall 2000): 739.

20 Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 736.

21 Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 7; quoted in Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 736.

22 Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 738.

ification "so that it may have fresh power to bind a new generation in the easy yoke of faith."[23]

Davis argues that the redactors pass down a Bible "chock-full of embarrassing, offensive, and internally contradictory texts, texts we do not wish to live with, let alone live *by*" for intentional and constructive reasons. By charitably engaging these texts, beginning with the presumption that these texts bear witness to the character of God, united as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we can observe what Davis calls the "critical traditioning" at work in them. The Bible submits itself to critique.

Anabaptism is well positioned to appreciate and empathize with this form of ongoing biblical exegesis, a hermeneutic that retains the past while also subjecting it to critique.

One example Davis offers is the conquest narratives. While one strand of the biblical story offers a clear, God-commanded annihilation of the tribes in Canaan, a second tradition exists alongside this Deuteronomic storyline. In Genesis 34:30, Jacob resists destroying the Canaanites out of strategic concerns. In Joshua, after the Israelites come into the land, the conquest narratives are relatively silent on the bad character of the Canaanites and instead show us a much more complicated picture of these peoples. The Gibeonites scheme to make an alliance with Israel. The story of Rahab inverts the assumptions of blessed conquerors by celebrating the conquered, offering an ethic in contradiction to the stories about Canaanite perfidy.[24]

I suspect that the early writers and redacting communities of the Bible were not convinced of their own ability to judge the tradition by excluding problematic texts from their canon. Humans, sinful and fallen, translate their own biases and cultural products into the Bible, both the OT and the NT. At the same time, the freedom of God is such that within the Bible we witness God's continued revelation through the discerning and interpreting that occurs in those texts' transmission.

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23 Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 738.

24 Davis, "Critical Traditioning," 740–43.

forming). Our spiritual ancestors adopted a communal hermeneutic that stood in stark contrast to the professionalization of scriptural interpretation in the hands of clerics. Instead, the gathered body, charged by the Holy Spirit, encountered and was encountered by Jesus Christ. Through this encountering, this discerning together, the church learns how to live. Rather than standing outside of Scripture as its judge, we are part of a project that spans thousands of years in which ordinary people transmit and interpret Scripture. Each generation confronts new questions as we follow the call to faithfulness to the God who meets us in the Bible.

About the author

Melissa Florer-Bixler is the pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church, North Carolina. A graduate of Duke University and Princeton Theological Seminary, she has spent time studying in Israel/Palestine, Kenya, and England. Much of her formation took place in the L'Arche community of Portland, Oregon, though now she prefers the Eno River and her garden in Raleigh, North Carolina. She is the chair of L'Arche North Carolina and a steering committee member in broad-based organizing in her county. Melissa has published two books, *Fire by Night: Finding God in the Pages of the Old Testament* (Herald, 2019) and *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace* (Herald, 2021), and her writing has appeared in *Christian Century*, *Sojourners*, *Geez*, *Anabaptist Witness*, *The Bias*, *Faith & Leadership*, and *Vision*. From time to time, she also publishes academic writing. She and her spouse parent three children.