

# Yahweh Saves: Why I believe in a non-violent God

Spencer Paul Thompson

## Abstract

This paper introduces, in plain terms, the case for a non-violent God. Written during a catastrophic war in Palestine/Israel, the paper argues that Jesus reveals the nature of God to humanity in his character, in his teachings, and in his actions, all of which were non-violent. The revelation of Jesus thus completes the trajectory of the Old Testament, affirming its theological advances while exploding the residual assumption of divine violence.

## Conflicts old and new

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East has reached the scale of Armageddon. At the time of writing, 22,320 Palestinians and 1,327 Israelis had been killed in less than three months, and the toll continues to rise.<sup>1</sup> These human beings were overwhelmingly civilians, and disproportionately children and women. Each one of them had family and friends, hopes and dreams, a personality and a name. Each one of them bore the image of God.

In the West, the war has ignited passionate disagreements within political parties, around dinner tables, and of course online. I have no desire to wade into these quagmires – at least not here, and at least not directly. In my experience, as is often the case, opposing sides of the argument hold different worldviews. Any discussion comes to nothing – apart from incredulity and frustration – if it fails to probe the beliefs and values that underpin our opinions.

This is all the more true when religious convictions are involved – which they invariably are when it comes to a certain patch of land in the Middle East. It is these religious convictions that are the focus here. So while I do not intend the following to be a political polemic – in fact, most of it was written before that fateful attack on October 7 – nor do I deny that there are political implications.

Such a denial would be futile in any case. The subject here is the nature of God as revealed in Jesus, and how that squares with Biblical passages that appear to sanctify the massacre of entire

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel - reported impact | Day 83”, last modified 28 December, 2023, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-reported-impact-day-83>.

people groups. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu drew an unambiguous link between these passages and the present conflict when he cited Deuteronomy 25:17 as a justification for the siege and bombardment of Gaza: “‘You must remember what Amalek has done to you’, says our Holy Bible”.<sup>2</sup> While Zionists rallied to this war cry, more sceptical observers reminded us of what such an edict entailed:

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.’” (1 Samuel 15:2-3, NIV).

But while I cannot deny that there are political implications of what follows, I would ask the reader not to put the cart before the horse. If we are to credibly maintain that our political views follow from our religious convictions rather than vice versa, we must be able to discuss those convictions in their own right. And if we are to credibly maintain those convictions at all, we must be able to discuss them with an open mind, if only to show that we hold them for good reason.

### **Justifying violence**

One of the most common stumbling blocks for Christians (I cannot speak for Jews) is the condonement of violence in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. To put the matter bluntly, God is sometimes portrayed as a ruthless warmonger. In certain passages, such as those quoted by Netanyahu, He appears to not only tolerate violence, but to command it on a mass scale. We find these verses confusing, for they seem to contradict what is stated elsewhere in the Old Testament and, crucially, what is revealed in Jesus – that God is loving, merciful, and compassionate.

Most of the writings and sermons that I have encountered on this topic attempt to deny that there is any inconsistency within the Bible regarding the nature of God. These apologetic messages variously appeal to God’s multi-faceted character; highlight Jesus’s harsher teachings; and adduce contextual information, for example with respect to the depravity of Israel’s enemies, which purportedly rationalises the imperative for massacre. A more dogmatic approach is to eschew any explanation whatsoever, reverting instead to God’s sovereignty: He can do what He wants, since He is God; and we are in no position to question it, since we are not.

I find these arguments to be unduly defensive and intellectually dishonest. They begin with their own conclusion, performing theological gymnastics to preserve the hallowed inerrancy of

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Giatti, “Netanyahu compares Hamas to Amalek, rival of the Israelites,” *Christian Post*, October 31, 2023, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/netanyahu-compares-hamas-to-amalek-rival-of-the-israelites.html>.

scripture. Feats of this kind may help reassure those who are already invested, emotionally, professionally, or otherwise, in a particular hermeneutic; but anyone seeking truth without prejudice is unlikely to be persuaded. Divine violence is a major theme in the Bible – if a theory can only accommodate it through ad-hoc explanations or none at all, reason demands that the theory be revised.

It is not just that these apologetic positions lack explanatory power. In my view, they miss the whole point of the passages in question. Indeed, far from disposing of such texts, as some progressively minded readers may be inclined to do, I want to interpret them in light of what we know to be true about God – and what we know to be true about the Bible. If we take this approach, I believe that we can glean invaluable truths from all scripture.

### **Show us the Father**

Let us start by agreeing that Jesus is the consummate and definitive revelation of God. This is what Jesus claimed (John 14:9), what his disciples believed (John 1:14,18), and what the apostles taught (Colossians 1:15, 2:9). The author of Hebrews tells us that while “at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets”, He has latterly revealed Himself through His Son, who is “*the exact imprint of His nature*” (Hebrews 1:1-3, ESV, emphasis added). It couldn’t be any clearer: Jesus shows us what God is like, precisely and completely.

This revelation must have contained new information, or at least a new understanding – otherwise it would not have been a revelation. Indeed, Jesus did not match anyone’s expectations of the Messiah, let alone God incarnate – to a man, everyone was either dubious, surprised, or offended. As is well-known, most Jews were anticipating the Messiah to be a militaristic leader who would vanquish their enemies and liberate the nation of Israel once and for all.<sup>3</sup> What they got was a gentle and lowly servant who rejected earthly power (e.g. Matthew 4:8-10, 11:29, 26:53). Ultimately, Jesus not only refused to deal out the violence that even his disciples expected, for which he rebuked them (Luke 9:51-56); but in the ultimate act of kenotic love, he took such violence upon himself (Philippians 2:1-11), even forgiving those who killed him (Luke 23:34).

It is easy to understand why the Israelites would espouse the notion of a violent Messiah. For one, as an occupied nation which had experienced more than its fair share of oppression, it was only natural to yearn for justice. And taken at face value, much of the Old Testament is consistent with the belief that this justice would be achieved through violent means. With heroes like Joshua,

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<sup>3</sup> Trevan Hatch, “Messianism and Jewish Messiahs in the New Testament Period,” in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society*, ed. Lincoln Blumell (Provo: Religious Studies Center, 2019), 78-80.

David, and Elijah, all of whom slaughtered their enemies at the behest of the God of Israel, why would anyone expect anything else?

The point is not that the scriptures were simply ‘wrong’ about the nature of God. For starters, they foretell the coming of the Christ, including his death, in remarkable detail – including his peacefulness and his identity as God (e.g. Isaiah 2:4; 9:5-7, 11:1-9). Jesus himself claimed that the scriptures testify of him (Luke 24:25-32; Matthew 13:35; John 5:39). But it is also too simplistic to say that the scriptures were categorically ‘right’. What we observe in the Old Testament is not a cohesive set of truth claims, but rather a range of portrayals of God which emerged over thousands of years of diverse authorship. If you want to find a violent God in the Bible, you can, but the matter is not open-and-shut – even within the Old Testament.

In fact, while the Old Testament was being written, the very idea of God as such was under constant development, not to mention dispute. This is demonstrated by the various names for God that appear in the scriptures, many of which referred originally to separate deities. The historical evidence indicates that even Yahweh began as part of a polytheistic Canaanite religion, along with the likes of Baal.<sup>4</sup> It was not until later that Yahweh came to be established as the God of Israel, in opposition to Baal (cf. 1 Kings 18), and later still that He came to be understood as a universal, relational God rather than a warrior-like storm god in the same mould as Baal (cf. Hosea 2). I would argue that the revelation of Jesus was the final stage in this evolution, embodying what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the final word in reality”: Love (cf. 1 John 4:7-21).<sup>5</sup>

To reiterate, none of this discredits or disparages the Old Testament. On the contrary, what we observe in the Hebrew scriptures is a radical, unprecedented evolution in humankind’s understanding of the nature of God. We could go so far as to say that the Hebrews pioneered the

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<sup>4</sup> John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 226-233.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Acceptance Speech”, Nobel Peace Prize 1964, accessed 29 December, 2023, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/acceptance-speech/>. Full quote: “I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. I believe that even amid today’s mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what self-centered men have torn down men other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day mankind will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive good will proclaim the rule of the land. “And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree and none shall be afraid.” I still believe that *We Shall* overcome!”

very idea of God as we know it, i.e. a singular, personal divinity from whom all morality stems.<sup>6</sup> In terms of violence, the conception of gods as bloodthirsty jingoists was commonplace in the context(s) of ancient Canaan and elsewhere. The Hebrew Bible marks a groundbreaking departure from this theological trope, towards a God of creation, covenant, and compassion.

But progress takes time, particularly when dealing with the kinds of sacred beliefs that underpin entire civilisations. The chasm between Baal and Christ is vast (2 Corinthians 6:15), and we cannot expect the Old Testament authors to have completely crossed it before the other side had been fully revealed. When Christ did reveal himself, he affirmed their theological breakthrough, but also belied some of their residual assumptions – including, I would argue, their attachment to nationalistic violence. If we view the Bible in these terms, the contradictions that we encounter regarding the nature of God within the Old Testament, and between the Old and New Testaments, no longer appear as contradictions, but rather as different stages of understanding.

We can draw an instructive parallel with the history of cosmology, as outlined in Thomas Kuhn’s famous treatise, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.<sup>7</sup> The Copernican revolution marked a radical shift away from the geocentrism of the Ptolemaic model by proposing that the earth revolved around the sun, rather than vice versa. However, it actually retained much of Ptolemy’s framework until Johannes Kepler proposed a theory that did not rely on the fundamental idea of circular orbits. We needed Copernicus (and others) to get to Kepler (and beyond), but we would no longer teach Copernican cosmology as if it accurately described the universe.

Jesus claimed to be “the way, the truth, and the life”, and stated that nobody comes to the Father except through him. When subsequently requested by one his disciples to show them the Father, Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*” (John 14:6-9, NIV, emphasis added). What we read in the Old Testament are human portrayals of God, written by people who did not have the privilege of knowing the human who *was* God – the truth “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched” (1 John 1:1, NIV). This makes their vision all the more remarkable, and in my view evinces divine inspiration. But now that we have the full revelation, I for one will always err on the side of Jesus – including on the question of violence.

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<sup>6</sup> Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 40-78.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962).

## Behold the Lamb

With this in mind, some like-minded readers of the liberal variety may be inclined to dispense with the Old Testament, at least the really gory bits. Now that we have the full revelation, what use do we have for the partial? My answer is that Jesus conveyed his message by engaging with the Old Testament scriptures, through his teachings as well as through his actions. So just as we need Jesus in order to understand the Old Testament, we need the Old Testament in order to understand Jesus – and therefore to understand God, including His non-violent nature.

Let us start with the actions. I could cite various examples that would be pertinent, such as the time that he dispersed a crowd intent on stoning a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). We could also discuss some potential but debatable counter-examples, such as the apocalyptic language of Revelation. But the crucifixion stands out as the key event – not only because of its significance in general, but also because of its relevance to violence. The crucifixion in turn raises the question of the atonement, which is my main focus here. I am however reluctant to broach the topic – not because I worry it will undermine my case, though I admit I am no expert, but rather because I worry it will elicit a knee-jerk reaction. Challenging the conventional wisdom on the atonement could feel like an attack on our faith, provoking a defensiveness that shuts down our capacity for good-faith discussion and rational thought.

To pre-empt this response, let me begin by noting that the conventional wisdom of evangelical Christendom is only conventional *within* evangelical Christendom. Evangelicals make up only one-quarter of the 2.5 billion Christians alive today, and a much smaller proportion of all Christians who have ever lived.<sup>8</sup> Other branches of Christianity, including some other branches of Protestantism, have long espoused alternative theories of atonement, with legitimate disagreements on the matter going back all the way to the Church Fathers. Of course, we are not obliged to accept any of these theories; the point is rather that we have no grounds for dismissing other views out of hand, let alone condemning them as heretical.

My second plea is to realise that whatever theory we favour, we cannot deny that the atonement is a mystical phenomenon. Just because we can rehearse a formulaic description of the process does not mean that we understand its inner workings – particularly since any such description will consist of a set of words and images that purport to capture spiritual truths, rather

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<sup>8</sup> Evangelical Focus, “660 million evangelicals in the world?”, 18 February, 2020, <https://evangelicalfocus.com/print/5119/660-million-evangelicals-in-the-world>.

than consisting of the truths themselves. This is simply the nature of doctrine.<sup>9</sup> What does it really mean that Jesus pays the price of our sins, or that he cleanses us from our sins, or that he bears the punishment for our sins – or indeed that he does all of these at once? We can agree that these statements are true – that is, that the words and images convey truth – without agreeing exactly on the sense in which they are true.

Here we arrive at the substance of the argument. All of these statements of course share a referent in the sacrificial system elaborated in the Old Testament law; and it is clear that by dying on the Cross, Jesus was engaging with that system, fulfilling it even (e.g. Hebrews 9-10). But what does it actually mean for Jesus to fulfil the sacrificial system? A familiar answer is that God requires payment or punishment for sin by virtue of His justice and holiness; and though this demand was partially, temporarily, and/or symbolically appeased through the Levitical practices of ritual slaughter, it could only be satisfied once and for all through the death of God's son.<sup>10</sup> But this answer is problematic – and it is not the only answer.

We should begin by noting that the sacrificial system was both highly typical of the ancient Near East and highly atypical.<sup>11</sup> Animal sacrifice was a common method of worship among other religions, but it was generally performed in the spirit of placating a vengeful, capricious deity such as Baal who may otherwise blight the crops, capsize the boats, or plague the children. For the Hebrews, on the other hand, the sacrificial system served to maintain a covenant with Yahweh, who would then be faithful to uphold His promises. It therefore fits squarely within the progressive arc of the Old Testament: it takes its own context as the point of departure, but then forges a new path.

Christians would all agree that this path leads to Jesus. But the idea that the whole story culminated in a cosmic act of child sacrifice would surely carry too much bathos, given that the

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<sup>9</sup> This highlights the importance of complementing doctrine with experiential practices. To give some examples from across the panoply of Christian tradition: the mediaeval anchoress Julian of Norwich, writing on her deathbed, felt a conviction to share in the suffering of the crucified Christ, seeing visions relating inter alia to his love, his trinitarian nature, his omnipresence, and his victory over the devil; following an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Count Zinzendorf and the Moravian community developed an entire contemplative praxis around the "side-wound" of Christ; and in Orthodox Christianity, the cross is central to the Paschal mystery, which emphasises victory over death, the renewal of creation, participation in the passion, and becoming one with God, all of which are expressed liturgically and sacramentally. Legal and transactional theories of atonement, coupled with an ethos of doctrinal rigidity, seem to render at least some Protestant denominations less amenable to these kinds of mystical channels.

<sup>10</sup> There is some variation in the Christian understanding of how exactly the sacrificial system and the cross fit together. The predominant view seems to be that animal sacrifices *covered* sins (Leviticus 4:20), but did not actually *remove* them (Hebrews 10:4), following the Hebrew and Greek terms respectively. Their main role is generally seen as foreshadowing the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Abba, "The Origin and Significance of Hebrew Sacrifice," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 7, no. 3 (August 1977): 133.

prohibition of this very practice was a hard-won distinction of Yahweh worship vis-à-vis the cults of Baal and related deities (Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31, 18:10; 2 Kings 16:3, 21:6, 23:10; Isaiah 57:5; Ezekiel 16:20-21; Psalm 106:37-39). Of course, it could be argued that this prohibition was a kind of prelude to the ultimate, divine sacrifice, allegorised perhaps by the abortive sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22). “Do not sacrifice your children,” God may have been instructing the Hebrews, in His mercy. “Sacrifice these animals instead, until I sacrifice my own child.” But this still implies that child sacrifice was somehow necessary, which goes against the direction of travel: God seems more like Baal, not less.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Jeremiah insists repeatedly that the idea of sacrificing one’s children was not only anathema to Yahweh, but “did not enter [His] mind” (Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5, 32:35).

This is all too ironic to ignore – and I think that is the point. I would propose that Jesus’s death was, among other things, a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*: it shows us that if we really believe in a God who demands innocent blood as atonement for sin, the only way for his wrath to ever be fully satisfied would be for his own son to die, which is sacrilegious – even more so if the Son and the Father are One, which they are. It is in this way that Jesus fulfilled the sacrificial system – his death was the necessary price, the necessary punishment, and the necessary sacrifice to show us the true nature of God, dispelling the myth of divine violence.

The Cross shows us that this myth originates not with God, but with ourselves. It was humans who planned Jesus’s death, handing him over to the authorities; it was humans who bayed for his blood, shouting “crucify him!”; and it was humans who tortured, abused, and killed him.<sup>13</sup> All of these people believed in violent gods of one sort or another, but their actions ultimately amounted to violence *against* God. Jesus went to the Cross willingly to show us that it is *we* who demand violence – and more than that, it is *we* who demand a violent God. This is such a deep-seated impulse that even the most enlightened of theologies were unable to shake it; but in Christ, it is finally exposed, and finally denied. How then can we interpret the Cross through the lens of a violent God, if its entire purpose was to shatter that lens? For that matter, how can we interpret any of the Bible this way? Might it be because we are susceptible to the same impulse?

The Cross is truly the crux of the issue. Under some theories of atonement, Jesus reinforces our conceptions of a violent God. Jesus’s death may have appeased the wrath of God, giving us

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<sup>12</sup> On this note, it is interesting that different names for God are used in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19). *Elohim* (translated “God”) commands Abraham to initiate the sacrifice, but *Yahweh* (“the LORD”) commands him to cease. It is possible to read this story as a microcosm of the Old Testament’s theological progression, moving away from a god of child sacrifice towards the God who is revealed in Jesus.

<sup>13</sup> Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God* (New York: Waterbrook, 2017), 99-116.



salvation; but it also confirmed that He is wrathful in a way that Jesus himself was not. While Biblical references can be marshalled to support this argument, I think it misses the point. I believe that Jesus is indeed the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29); but I also believe that this same Lamb unveils God, and in so doing reveals the true meaning of our Holy Bible (Revelation 5). As Brad Jersak writes in *A More Christlike God*, which informed much of this paper: “We know who God is and what love is as we behold the Cross of Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

### **You have heard it said**

It isn't just Jesus's actions that cast new light on the Old Testament; his teachings do likewise. Consider the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus references a law repeated several times in the Hebrew scriptures: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also...” (Matthew 5:38-39, NIV; cf. Exodus 21; Leviticus 24; Deuteronomy 19). At the time that it was enshrined, the Old Testament idea of proportionate retribution could have been a radical development, preventing endless cycles of revenge.<sup>15</sup> Characteristically, Jesus does not abolish this law, but rather draws out its true spirit – which in this case is one of non-violence (cf. Matthew 5:17; 22:36-40).

At times, Jesus's hermeneutic is more selective – particularly when it comes to violence. To inaugurate his ministry at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus chooses to read the Jubilee prophecy of Isaiah 61, itself a progression on Leviticus 25. Yet Jesus finishes his recital with Isaiah's proclamation of “the year of the Lord's favour”, when the scripture itself goes on to proclaim, in the same breath, “the day of vengeance of our God.” This omission can only have been intentional, even if there is some room for debate as to what exactly the intention was.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus also addresses the question of God's nature directly. On multiple occasions, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' indignation regarding his apparently unlawful behaviour by quoting Hosea 6, which reads, “I [God] desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13, 12:7; cf. Hebrews 10:5-9). A number of other prophets, such as Isaiah, Amos, and Micah, echo this statement – which, whether or not it represents a disavowal of the sacrificial system per se, seeks to prioritise liberation, mercy, and justice for the poor in our understanding of God. Hosea in particular is keen to expunge from our theology any residue of Baal, that vengeful tyrant who demanded child sacrifice,

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<sup>14</sup> Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike God* (Pasadena: Plain Truth Ministries, 2015), 101.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 213.

<sup>16</sup> Zahnd, *Sinners*, 41.

proclaiming instead a covenantal God who would “abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land” (Hosea 2:16-20).

It is true that Jesus teaches on hell, repeatedly in fact, even stating that God (though not specified as such) has the authority to cast into the same (Luke 12:5; Matthew 10:28, 23:33). But it is by no means clear that these teachings entail a violent God. The word used by Jesus (i.e. its Greek translation) is *Gehenna*, which was a physical valley on the outskirts of Jerusalem that served as an incinerator for the city’s waste. Nowhere else in the New Testament does this word appear, apart from one mention in James to describe the fiery defilement of the tongue (James 3:6). But in the Old Testament, it is named as the very valley (*Ben Hinnom* in the Hebrew) in which children had been ceremonially immolated as sacrifices to Moloch – the profane practice that had been so roundly condemned by the Prophets as they sought to differentiate Yahweh (2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6; 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31-32, 32:35). So to conclude from Jesus’s allusion to Gehenna that God burns people alive for eternity seems not only off the mark, but back to front, even if questions remain as to its actual significance.

It is also true that a number of Jesus’s parables depict a harsh, even violent ruler, whom some commentators construe to be God. Examples include the parable of the Minas, in which the nobleman slaughters his recalcitrant enemies (Luke 19:11-27); the parable(s) of the tenants, in which the landowner executes his treacherous workers (Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19); and the parable of the servants, in which the master butchers his iniquitous manager (Matthew 24:45-51). The key here is to recognise that parables are distinct from allegories: the details serve to support a single message by dramatising the story, rather than each bearing some independent, metaphorical import.<sup>17</sup> And the scriptural and historical context indicates that the message of these parables is not that God is a brutal overlord; rather their purpose is to critique the religious leaders and warn of forthcoming disasters in unambiguously stark terms. The ruler figure is not even identified as God in any of these parables – such an interpretation is our own, and may again reflect our own preconceptions.

If anything, the parables act to subvert these preconceptions, at least when juxtaposed with the person of Jesus. For example, immediately after imparting the parable of the Minas, which features the merciless nobleman who returns from his coronation to kill his enemies, Jesus enters Jerusalem (Luke 19:28-44). In so doing, he models a diametrically different kind of kingship, fulfilling Zechariah’s prophecy of a humble king coming to Jerusalem on a donkey to bring peace on earth, ultimately by being killed himself (Zechariah 9:9-10, 12:10). This contrast can be generalised: the

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<sup>17</sup> C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (Glasgow: Collins, 1988), 18.

very one telling the parables is Jesus, who bears strikingly little resemblance to the landlord, the master, or the nobleman, let alone a God who commands the slaughter of entire people groups.<sup>18</sup> So perhaps we should view these parables, along with other scriptures that appear to depict a violent God, as mirrors as much as windows: they expose our own misconceptions about God in the very way that we are inclined to read them. And perhaps we should take note of the frightened servant in the parable of the Minas, whose own belief in an un-Christlike God had serious, real-world consequences (cf. Matthew 25:14-30).

We could go on, but ultimately Jesus's teachings do not constitute a verse-by-verse commentary on the Old Testament.<sup>19</sup> Just as the scriptures intimate the meaning of Jesus, so Jesus intimates the meaning of the scriptures, and we are left to connect the dots. The solution must surely be to assimilate not only the content of Jesus's interpretation, but also the method.<sup>20</sup> Jesus handled the scriptures with reverence and competence; but by this very fact, his approach was to follow their trajectory rather than simply them at face value. Indeed, one of his main criticisms of the scribes and Pharisees was that for all their scriptural diligence, they failed to see the wood for the trees (Matthew 23:23; John 5:39-40). We should be careful not to make the same mistake.

### **Yahweh saves**

As Jesus makes his final journey to Jerusalem, he passes through a certain Samaritan village. The inhabitants, ethnic rivals of the Israelites since the Babylonian exile, reject him. Recalling Elijah's actions when the same people had worshipped Baal (2 Kings 1), James and John ask him, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" (Luke 9:54, NIV). Jesus, however, rebukes the Sons of Thunder; and in some manuscripts, adds "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of man came not to destroy men's lives but to save them".

Jesus's self-declared mission is codified in his own name, which means 'Yahweh saves'. The Hebrew equivalent is *Yeshua* – a name shared by a certain Old Testament hero, Joshua the son of Nun. Many a sermon has highlighted the uncanny parallels between Joshua and Jesus: they were both sons of Josephs, who hailed from Ephraim/Ephrata, meaning 'fruitful'; both are described as loving God's house; and both were God-appointed leaders who won a new life for their people. So in

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<sup>18</sup> Jersak, *Christlike God*, 216.

<sup>19</sup> I do not address the oft-cited verse on Jesus bringing a sword rather than peace. It is patently clear from the context, both preceding and succeeding, that Jesus is referring to the fact that people will not always accept those who profess him (Matthew 10:32-42). There is absolutely nothing here about violence, at least not violence committed in his name.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Rohr, *What Do We Do with the Bible?* (London: SPCK, 2019), chapter 3.

Joshua we see a type of Christ, i.e. a prefiguration of the true saviour, Jesus. But there are also ways in which Joshua and Jesus are remarkably *dissimilar* – and these are equally enlightening.

The Yeshua of the Old Testament set out to save the Israelites, which he accomplished by destroying their enemies. Indeed, the word ‘destroy’ appears some twenty times in the book – usually, as per Netanyahu’s quotation from 1 Samuel, in the context of annihilation. Witness the conquest of Jericho: “Then they utterly destroyed all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword” (Joshua 6:21, RSV). But the Yeshua of the New Testament came “not to destroy men’s lives”; instead, he gave up his own life. We see a particularly dramatic foreshadowing of the Cross when Joshua executes five kings of Canaan by hanging them from trees and, at sunset, placing their dead bodies in a cave to be sealed by “great stones” (Joshua 10:26-27, RSV). Jesus is involved in an ordeal that is remarkably similar in detail, but one crucial discrepancy stands out: rather than inflicting the violence, he is on its receiving end.

The similarities between Joshua and Jesus are striking, but so too are the dissimilarities. I cannot help but infer that Jesus is revising our perception of what it means for God to save, what God requires and desires, and more generally what He is like. Can you imagine Jesus commanding that the inhabitants of Jericho, or Amalek, or any other nation be slaughtered, down to the last man, woman, and child? Does that seem consistent with his character, with his teachings, and with his actions? If not, how can it be consistent with God’s?

### **A light has dawned**

We have ventured into a wide range of topics, from hell to hermeneutics, without being able to do justice to any of them.<sup>21</sup> But ultimately, the core of my argument can be distilled into a few simple propositions:

- Premise 1: Jesus shows us the nature of God in his character, his teachings, and his actions.
- Premise 2: Jesus was non-violent in his character, his teachings, and his actions.
- Conclusion: It follows that God is non-violent.

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<sup>21</sup> There are many other relevant topics that I have not raised at all, notably the role of Israel as a nation and, separately, as a state. Given the divisiveness of these topics as well their bearing on current events, I deemed that they would eclipse my argument. Yet it is clear that the history and theology of violence are inextricable from our conception of peoples and how they are meant to relate to each other, as is our understanding of the nature of God. It is also clear that Jesus preaches and embodies a message of universal salvation (Matthew 22:1-14, 28:19-20; John 4:4-42; Acts 1:8), tying a thread that runs throughout the Old Testament (Genesis 12:3; Deuteronomy 10:18-19; Isaiah 49:6) and into the New (Acts 2:1-12; Galatians 2:1-16, 3:28; Ephesians 3:6). An arguable corollary is that ethics pertaining to interpersonal relations, such as turning the other cheek or loving one’s enemies, cannot be legitimately divorced from ethics pertaining to international relations, or from politics in general.

For those who continue to embrace the idea of a violent God, it may be worth considering which of these claims you dispute. Do you believe that Jesus does not show us the nature of God, at least not fully? Do you believe that Jesus was violent, or at least not altogether non-violent? Or do you question the logic, perhaps because I have not adequately defined what I mean by violence?<sup>22</sup>

Personally, based on the arguments and evidence that I have either been proffered by others or sought out myself, as well as my own experiences and inner convictions, I am unable to reconcile the person of Jesus with a violent God. More than that, I feel compelled to conclude that one of the main reasons that Christ came to earth was precisely to show us that God is *not* violent. This is the light that has dawned: that the Prince of Peace embodies the very nature of the Everlasting Father (Isaiah 9:6).

Far from motivating me to discard the Old Testament, this realisation has brought the scriptures alive to me, for the way that the progression unfolds through the pages and over the centuries is truly marvellous. But by the same token, I am obliged to reject interpretations of the Bible that condone violence, especially those that attribute violence to God. When Netanyahu invokes Deuteronomy as a God-given mandate to carry out carnage, and when Christians hail yet another holy war, I cannot help but ask: where is Jesus in this picture? Where, indeed, is God?

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<sup>22</sup> This omission is intentional, for I have resisted the temptation to encumber the argument with my own theoretical apparatuses. Certain Old Testament passages are manifestly violent; I have simply argued that Jesus speaks to those passages.

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