

GOD IS A MAN OF WAR: THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

(STEPHEN DE YOUNG)

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Many, if not most, modern Christians are crypto-Marcionites. They resonate with the heresy that God, as revealed in the Old Testament, is different from God as revealed by Jesus Christ. Marcion (the second-century-A.D. originator of the heresy, an early form of Gnosticism) had to throw out the entire Old Testament and most of the New Testament to make this idea coherent. Moderns don't bother with coherency; they simply erase or ignore much of what God does in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, because some of it is unpalatable to modern tastes. To correct this basic theological error, Father Stephen De Young, an Orthodox priest, is here to justify, or at least explain, the ways of God to man.

Father De Young is the priest of an Orthodox parish in Louisiana. He is best known for his work with Ancient Faith Ministries, an Orthodox publishing house that has very successfully branched out into podcasts. De Young's focus is the Orthodox tradition, especially that connected to the early Church, to which end he has become a Scriptural expert (not so self-described, but nonetheless true). The title of this book (he is prolific) comes from Exodus 15:3, where the Israelites celebrate and praise God for delivering them from the Egyptians, drowning Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea. "Yahweh is a man of war; Yahweh is His name." (De Young does his own translations. Some translations, including the Orthodox Study Bible, tone this verse down; the Navarre Bible, a Roman Catholic comprehensively annotated version, notes the tendency toward dulling the language and uses the same language as De Young.)

About a year ago, I listened to several episodes of "Lord of Spirits," a joint podcast of De Young with another Orthodox priest, Father Andrew Stephen Damick. The topics are fascinating—heaven, hell, the Divine Council, and much more that you will not find at your local megachurch, and if you ask the pastor there about these matters, he will likely call the police. I stopped listening, though, because the two priests most often failed to discuss the topic at hand with any specificity; they ramble, and they become quite repetitive. Oh, it's a fascinating ramble,

but I prefer very precise Q-and-A. That's what you get from, say, Saint Thomas Aquinas. Orthodoxy, outside of specific doctrine, tends to be (in my very limited experience) less offering of definitive answers. Ah well. I still recommend checking out the podcast.

As to this book, in short, very short, De Young's overarching framework is that of our fallen world, which contains, whether we wish it or not, suffering, pain, and death. We all know that the Old Testament is filled with violence, not infrequently ordered directly by God, some of it directed at women and children. Since the so-called Enlightenment, those wishing to attack Christianity frequently point to this violence and argue, in essence, that Christ rejected violence, so Christianity contradicts itself, and therefore cannot be true. Christian thinkers (and Christianity's foes) have been aware of this dynamic for two thousand years; Marcion's response was just the most extreme, or perhaps the one that is most remembered. There is a certain type of critic, well represented today by midwits such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, who thinks that by pointing out difficult passages in the Old Testament, they have freshly disproved Christianity. They are seemingly unaware that for two thousand years Christianity's greatest minds have directly addressed such objections (as expertly detailed by Robert Louis Wilken in *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*).

To the extent a contradiction is seen (not all Christians have opposed or do oppose violence, quite the contrary, to which we will return), interpretations of the most problematic Scriptural passages have tended to treat them as allegory, of prophesied events to be fulfilled without violence in the New Testament, or perhaps with violence at the end of time. While De Young does not reject allegory, he rejects it can explain many of the very specific historical events Scripture narrates. "When the scriptures or elements of the Church's Tradition prove difficult, this is an invitation to delve into them more deeply, not to evade them." De Young argues that allegorical readings have not meant to deny historicity, but rather to explain why those events happened, as one-time events, and thus to prevent their use as a justification for present-day violence.

The author begins with justice. God's purpose, His intention, which will necessarily be fulfilled, is to ultimately restore His justice over creation. All that He does, with respect to mankind, is ultimately directed at that end, and having us participate in and benefit from it. But, as De

Young points out, in the modern world justice has taken on several different meanings. Now, at this point, if I were the author, I'd just reject this branching of meaning outright, as a swerve into annoying novelties designed to achieve, and hide, political ends. If some aspect of justice wasn't parsed before 1750, it's likely not an aspect of justice. De Young takes modernity a little too seriously for my taste—not seriously as in a serious enemy, but serious as in having anything worthwhile to say.

This naivete, or perhaps gullibility, or perhaps excessive good intent, leads him to talk about retributive justice, distributive justice, and social justice. A rotten smell, that of the execrable John Rawls, sneaks up the reader's nose. Social justice is undeniably a content-free term ginned up by the Left. Yet De Young treats social justice seriously, asserting (and thereby adopting the words and view of the Left) that "oppressive habits and patterns tend to accrue in [imperfect human] social systems," and social justice is the demand these be addressed.

Assuming that it is true that "oppressive habits" accrue rather than merely exist, and that oppression is the explanation for human differences in absolute or relative position, a claim for which De Young presents no evidence or argument, correcting this is a matter of simple justice, not "social justice." The specific applications of justice are necessarily individual; adding "social" is just cover for demanding political action under the neutral-seeming rubric of justice. (As Paul Rahe said, "Justice is owed individuals, not groups. There is no such thing as 'social justice.' The phrase is a slogan used by those intent on looting.") Justice as applied to mankind, as Plato said (more or less), is giving to each his due. Nothing more, and nothing less. Justice can be retribution, or it can be correction and restitution (what De Young somewhat confusingly, and again with perhaps-unintended political overtones, calls distributive justice, a term not originated by the Left, but mutated by the Left from its original narrow meaning). But one who is truly oppressed (although nearly every concrete demand today for social justice adduces non-existent oppressions) does not demand social justice, but justice in one of its two basic meanings.

De Young really should grasp this. As he says, "The Hebrew word generally translated as 'justice' is *mishpat*, which conveys a realm of space and time where all things exist in their proper place and relationship to one another." This is the sense in which God is justice; in Orthodox

terms, justice is one of His divine energies, and it is our obligation to participate in God's actions toward justice. Failing to do so is sin. Yet De Young pays obeisance to the Left, who use social justice as a battering ram against actual justice. He should just stick to *mishpat*.

But let's get back to Yahweh. Judgment in the divine sense is not the rendering of a verdict. "Rather, judgment is the restoration of justice, of the correct order, and harmony of creation." Evil is counterpoised to justice; "evil enters creation as a result of humanity's collusion with evil spiritual forces," not as some kind of punishment delivered by God. De Young does not struggle with theodicy; as I have noted before, neither do I, although I am pretty sure that is because I have not (yet) been faced with true tragedy. The solution to evil, therefore, is clear—repentance and full participation in God's plan by all mankind. (Although this is not the focus of the book, De Young notes that "[t]hose who refuse repentance and justification until the end leave only one possibility for their fate. They must be removed from the created order entirely so that it can be set in order, an ordering they refuse." He is not a universalist.)

What does that participation look like? Western Christians, especially those inheritors of a Christianity that has become increasingly hollowed out over the past 150 years, often think of Christ as "meek and mild," in the words of the hymn by Charles Wesley. This is historically and theologically anomalous, and in any case is not something that the Orthodox have ever expressed much interest in. Rather, he is "Christ Victor," who through his Cross triumphed over death and the Devil—in a specific, physical way that we cannot truly comprehend, but which did not involve intellectual discussion. (De Young dismisses, and clearly does not like at all, substitutionary atonement, not that I like it any better—it always seemed silly and bizarre to me.) Christ did not triumph simply because he was a nice guy who said some cool things that made people like him. "Hallmark Christ," wearing a rollneck sweater and dispensing bromides, is not the real Christ, and a counterpart between that fake Christ and the Old Testament is a distraction.

Thus, we should reject out-of-hand that participation in redemption requires passivity in the face of evil. But even so, the Old Testament not infrequently, on the surface, does seem incompatible with the New Testament, in that it endorses violence that seems either excessive, or not directed at evil, or both. Turning the other cheek does not appear

often. Other than allegorical readings, legitimate Christian thinkers (as opposed to fake Christians, such as those involved with the ludicrous “Jesus Seminar”) have argued, as a result of this seeming incompatibility, that the Old Testament is a human product, rather than divinely inspired, and thus it reflects superseded cultural norms; or alternatively that the violent events narrated never happened. Given that the Gospels assume the absolute historicity and crucial relevance of the Old Testament (after all, there was no New Testament when the Gospels were written), these arguments are essentially self-refuting for any believing Christian. Yet most of us still recoil at the violence depicted in the Old Testament as endorsed by God.

What is death, De Young asks? An evil, brought upon mankind by ourselves, not a punishment from God. The purpose of life now, therefore, is to regain future union with God. Temporal life is not an end in itself, nor is prolonging it. Immortality in a fallen world is a type of hell; “violations of justice built into God’s creation are resolved at death.” For victims who suffer, it brings their suffering to an end; to the evil who inflict suffering, it brings their ability to inflict evil to an end. Death was the result of sin, and sin should not be understood primarily juridically, but as a type of infection, originating more in Cain’s sin, rather than Adam’s rebellion. Sin corrodes; simply ignoring it is not an option, if justice is to be perfected. This is very clear throughout the Hebrew Bible, with its emphasis on purification, and was the standard position of the Fathers of the Church.

Having introduced his themes, and buttressed them with numerous Scripture passages, De Young focuses on the Book of Joshua, which contains the greatest number of “problematic” passages (although he does himself no favors, if he wants to be taken seriously, by claiming that American “Manifest Destiny” was “a vile application of Joshua”). De Young leads with a standard Orthodox belief little known in the West—that the gods worshipped by ancient peoples, other than the Israelites, were not fictional, but actual demons, who had been assigned prior to their fall by God to lead nations, but failed in their assignment. Thus, Exodus 12:12 describes the plagues of Egypt as judgment against the gods of Egypt; Pharaoh and his ministers were certainly responsible for their actions, but “by directing the plagues of Egypt against the gods of Egypt, however, Yahweh not only judges those spirits but also conveys

truth to the Egyptian people." Pharaoh was exposed as being unable to manifest justice for the people, by the defeat of his gods.

So, to take what is perhaps the most problematic Biblical passage of all, in Psalm 136/137, which appears to demand killing the children of the Edomites by smashing their heads against stones, De Young reads this in the context of the Edomites being seen as governed by the fallen archangel Samael, leading them to rejoice at the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The children mentioned are "the progeny of the evil spirit who is here being condemned. They are the sins, evil thoughts, and temptations placed in the minds and hearts of humanity that lead humans to destruction." The reader is tempted to respond that De Young here adopts allegory, which he earlier rejected. There is no contradiction, however. He rejects allegory as the sole meaning of specific historical events; this is not an event, but an admonition, so an allegorical reading seems much more appropriate, especially given the context De Young provides.

Along similar, but less gruesomely dramatic, lines, all the wars fought by the Israelites in their takeover of Canaan should be understood as, to the extent they were wars of extermination (which ones were was clearly delineated by God), as wars against specific groups of people who were demon-led and in effect demon-possessed, whose death (or absorption into a new tribe, adopting a new identity, a form of repentance and also a type of extermination) was required for justice. (De Young talks quite a bit in many places, outside this book, about giants and their relation to demons; it seems to be one of his favorite topics.) In fact, a standard early Christian, and present Orthodox, interpretation of the many demons with whom Christ later interacted is that they were the evil spirits disembodied as a result of Israel's battles against the giant clans (this was also a Second Temple Jewish belief). Christ battled the same enemies as the Israelites; "the New Testament, therefore, does not speak of a different spiritual reality than does the Old."

This strikes us as odd; we have been taught to view these wars as having no real divine component, merely wars between two tribes of human beings, vying for land, and extermination as disproportionate and therefore unjust, if not an uncommon event in the ancient world. But this is again a failure of broader vision. Today we still recognize, if we have any sense, that the crimes of some, such as child sex traffickers

or abortionists, are fully heinous enough to warrant death as punishment. If we believe that the Jews received a direct revelation from God Himself, which we must as Christians, part of which was their duty to exterminate demons and their minions, which is at least a plausible reading, that Joshua “mowed down Amalek [a demonic giant] and his people with the edge of the sword” seems more like objective justice and less like bloodthirstiness. Joshua thereby restored “the correct order, and harmony of creation.”

Moving beyond this narrow type of war of extermination, De Young addresses holy war in general—that is, war, other than that against demons, that is done at God’s behest and with God’s blessing. In the Old Testament, God prescribes whom the Israelites will fight, and how they should be fought. War is obedience to God—or some war is; the further we get from Joshua, the less this is true, as men, the kings Samuel warned the Israelites against, make war for their own reasons, not God’s. Ancient peoples saw war as the combat of the respective combatants’ gods, and attempted to propitiate and encourage “their” god to help them out through rituals and sacrifice. The Israelites not infrequently fell into similar practices (such as Saul’s necromancy), even though Yahweh’s clear command was that He alone granted victory, or withheld it as punishment for failure to follow the Law, which is designed to bring about His justice. As part of the Law, God placed limits on warfare that were unique in ancient times, from which all of the modern limitations we regard as natural on war ultimately derive. Yet He still commanded war, and we should not shrink from this. “A world filled with violence needs correction, and its correction is a violent one.”

De Young wraps it up with discussing some specific passages used by Christianity’s enemies. Among others, he shows how the story of Elisha and the bears who appear to destroy his tormentors (2 Kings/4 Kingdoms 2:23) has nothing to do with killing children, but rather narrates young idol-worshipping toughs threatening God’s prophet, Elijah’s successor, with death, and receiving their just deserts. Lot’s offering of his daughters to the Sodomite mob demanding he hand over his guests for homosexual rape, while not righteous, has to be seen through the righteousness of protecting the stranger. Jephthah, who promised a sacrifice to God if he received victory, of whatsoever should meet him upon his return home, and sacrificed his daughter,

his only child, is not a positive example, but rather an example of the pagan transactional approach to gaining God's favor condemned by Yahweh. This last, recasting Jephthah as clearly a villain, strikes me as somewhat a stretch and not a mainstream interpretation. For example, the Orthodox Study Bible says of this passage, "The Spirit of the Lord descended on Jephthah to do battle against Ammon, making him one of the few Old Testament heroes indwelt by the Holy Spirit." On the other hand, quite a few theologians have developed theories that soften the story in some way, or cast Jephthah as part villain. I certainly have nothing new to add.

This book is far from exhaustive. (It appears to be mostly a combination of three lectures De Young gave.) There are no references whatsoever to other theological works, and precious few patristic references. The book is thus a self-contained exposition of De Young's views on Scripture, which are certainly not heretical, but it is unclear to me how much of what he says would be disputed by other Orthodox thinkers. I would have preferred, I suppose, a longer book, but it would have been a very difficult book; keeping it short makes it more accessible. Nonetheless, I don't think this book is the last word on the topic; for those interested, I am sure there are many other works, though perhaps none easy to read.

What does this imply about violence in the Christian Age? There are no longer any giant clans, and God has not commanded us to exterminate anyone, or for that matter fight any other nation states. Yes, He has clearly required us to deliver justice to wrongdoers, as I mention above; but attempts to cast nations as wrongdoers, violators of justice, in the modern world are all propaganda, pots calling the kettle black, not legitimate analogies to justice as dispensed by Israel in the Hebrew Bible. Yet violence is not only necessary, but desirable in some instances, and mainstream Christianity has long recognized this, although tension has always existed in Christianity between pacifist strains and more belligerent strains. De Young ignores this question, aside from some obligatory criticism of the Crusades (and an apparent implication that the only Muslim holy war was that related to the Crusades, which is grossly wrong). We could go down various rabbit holes here, talking of just war theory and of the right (and duty) of rebellion, of Christian emperors of Rome, of the turn away from pacifism in the West around

the turn of the first millennium, of the Lesser Magistrates, and much more. But not today, I think. Dragging God into the violence of today is a far different, and more complex, matter than understanding that Yahweh and Christ, second person of the Trinity, are one and the same God, and that Scripture is a unity. De Young does a good job of making that case, and we can leave it at that.