



Is GOD A  
VINDICTIVE  
BULLY?

*Reconciling* PORTRAYALS of GOD  
*in the* OLD and NEW TESTAMENTS

PAUL COPAN

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PART 1

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# The Great Divorce

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*How Wide the Divide between  
the Old and New Testaments?*

# The Old Testament God

## *Critics from Without and from Within*

### **Critics from Without: From A. A. Milne to Richard Dawkins**

“Yahweh” or “Jehovah”—the God of the Old Testament—has plenty of critics. One such was A. A. Milne, creator of the Winnie the Pooh stories. He claimed: “The Old Testament is responsible for more atheism, agnosticism, disbelief—call it what you will—than any book ever written.”<sup>1</sup>

What are their criticisms? The world’s most outspoken atheist, Oxford’s Richard Dawkins, gives them to us in a nutshell: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”<sup>2</sup> No wonder Dawkins advises parents not to use the Old Testament to teach morals to our children.

Dawkins is one of several “New Atheists” who rose to prominence in the wake of the September 11 attacks. They lashed out in condemnation not just of Islam but of *all* religion as poisonous and evil. Actually, my *Moral Monster* book uses these atheists’ descriptions of the Old Testament God (Yahweh) as chapter headings. And the titles of that previous book and of this one are taken from Dawkins.

These particular atheists created a negative reputation for themselves, even among secular academics. They were utterly tone-deaf to widespread criticisms

of their rhetoric, caricatures, and arguments.<sup>3</sup> One former New Atheist, P. Z. Myers, called this movement a “train wreck.”<sup>4</sup>

Even so, the bold challenge New Atheists presented has prompted many Christians to take a closer look at Scripture and reexamine texts that seemed much less troublesome to earlier generations of believers. Those are some of the critics from *without*.

## Critics from Within: Not the “Textual” God but the “Actual” God

The Old Testament’s portrayal of God has critics from *within* the Christian community as well. These include theologian and pastor Greg Boyd, Old Testament scholars Eric Seibert and Peter Enns, and others. On the one hand, *they would largely agree* with Dawkins’s description of “the God of the Old Testament” as “genocidal,” “vindictive,” and so on. On the other hand, these critics from within don’t think the *true* God is like this. The portrayal of “the most unpleasant character in all fiction” is not the *actual* God but the *textual* God.<sup>5</sup>

So, what’s the difference between the “actual” God and the “textual” God? As these scholars see it, when Scripture says that *God* gave David the victory over Goliath (1 Sam. 17:45–47) or that *God* promised to “drive out” the Canaanites from the promised land (Josh. 13:6), that wasn’t the *actual* God. The actual God is nonviolent, enemy-loving, self-sacrificing, and forgiving—especially as revealed in Jesus on the cross: “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34).

So the 415 mentions of “Thus says the LORD” often *don’t* come from the *actual* God—as you might think—but come from just the *textual* God. Who or what is this *textual* God? This is *the literary depiction of God by a fallen, violence-prone, culturally conditioned ancient Near Eastern biblical narrator or prophet*. That is, the *textual* God is just a *fictitious* and *flawed* representation.

According to Boyd, in the cross of Christ the *actual* God exposes and repudiates the false, idolatrous, blasphemous falsehoods of this *textual* God.<sup>6</sup> The enemy-loving Jesus reveals a God who could never command or engage in “violence.” The true God “hides” behind an ugly mask of violence and genocide.

Some of these critics from within also reject the doctrine of penal substitution. Often behind this critique are popular but outrageous caricatures and misrepresentations that no notable theologian defending this doctrine would endorse.

Table 1.1. The “Actual” God versus the “Textual” God

| Actual God   | Textual God   |
|--|---|
| The <i>true</i> portrayal of God as nonviolent, enemy-loving, forgiving, as exemplified by Jesus on the cross. | A <i>fictitious</i> portrayal of God that originates from the fallen, violence-prone, culturally conditioned biblical author’s or prophet’s ancient Near Eastern worldview. |



For example, a train switchman allows a train full of passengers to run over his young son playing on the track so that they won't be killed by an oncoming train on the other set of tracks. Such phony analogies tend to present *three* parties in this drama: an angry, wrathful God the Father; a loving but hapless Jesus forced onto the cross ("cosmic child abuse"); and sinful humanity. Rather than "sinners in the hands of an angry God," they think we should see the atonement only in terms of "sinners in the hands of a loving God."<sup>7</sup>

Why not both? A proper understanding of penal substitution has two parties in view—the loving and just triune God, and sinful humanity. Furthermore, God *loves* the world (John 3:16), and Jesus himself is *also* wrathful against sin (Rev. 6:16). Yet Jesus *voluntarily* lays down his life for lost human beings (John 10:17). The *triune God's* wrath against our sinful record is averted because the righteous Christ's accomplishment is *legally* imputed to our record if we receive this gift.

Consider how innocent, guilt-free parents legally represent their teenager, who has been the responsible party in an auto accident. They take care of the legal responsibility, paying the insurance costs (the legal penalty or "punishment") for their guilty teenager, thus allaying the potential "wrath" of the law. Though we can't get into this topic here, the doctrine of penal substitution is both robustly biblical and philosophically defensible.<sup>8</sup>

We're getting somewhat sidetracked, though. These critics from within claim that Old Testament prophets and narrators were simply "wrong" in much of what they said and did. After all, this was "inevitable" given all of the baggage of their ancient Near Eastern worldview.<sup>9</sup>

## God's Kindness, God's Severity, and Human Honesty

The apostle Paul writes, "Behold then the kindness and severity of God" (Rom. 11:22). As we'll see in this book, severity, toughness, or harshness is a theme in *both* Old Testament and New alike. That is, severity is a description not just of the *textual* God but of the *actual* God. That doesn't mean, though, that severity or wrath is central to the triune God's nature. As we'll see, *love* is God's central attribute, and God's severity *flows out of* his love. God desires the ultimate well-being of humans, but he will sometimes have to say, "Enough is enough." He will have to act in judgment to stop dehumanization and other evils that undermine human flourishing.

Biblical scholar N. T. Wright declares that to deny God's wrath is to deny his love:

Face it: to deny God's wrath is, at bottom, to deny God's love. When God sees humans being enslaved . . . if God doesn't hate it, he is not a loving God. . . . When God sees innocent people being bombed because of someone's political agenda, if God doesn't hate it, he isn't a loving God. When God sees people lying and cheating and abusing one another, exploiting and grifting and preying on one another, if God were to say, "Never mind, I love you all anyway," he is neither good nor loving. The

Bible doesn't speak of a God of generalized benevolence. It speaks of the God who made the world and loves it so passionately that he must and does hate everything that distorts and defaces the world and particularly his human creatures.<sup>10</sup>

We should expect this of the loving Cosmic Authority, whose severity cuts across the testaments.

## The Old Testament as a Friend

### *Charitability and the Golden Rule of Interpretation*

As biblical scholar Bruce Birch wrote, Old Testament texts “are rooted in a cultural context utterly unlike our own” with an outlook that is often “alien and in some cases repugnant to our modern sensibilities.”<sup>11</sup> In light of such concerns, author Mathew Richard Schlimm asks: *What if we approached the Old Testament's laws and historical narratives with charity rather than suspicion?* That is, we show a willingness to understand them in their historical context and allow them to speak. It's like wanting to learn from an old friend who is introducing a different culture and country to us.<sup>12</sup> What if we sought first to give the benefit of the doubt?

Consider a “golden rule” of interpretation: *treat another's writing as you yourself would want your own writing to be treated.* This doesn't mean being naive or uncritical; it does mean being charitable and fair as we honestly examine challenges in the text.

As traditional, Bible-believing Christians, one problem we readily see with some of our critics from without—who may be non-Christians, but particularly those of the New Atheist variety—is that they tend to *pounce* on any biblical text that strikes them as harsh or wrathful or strange. They aren't too concerned about nuance or context, nor are they very open to reasoned explanation or discussion. For example, they may ignore references to God's patience with stubborn Israelites or his sorrow at human sin. Or they latch on to the word “slave” in the Old Testament—an unfortunate rendering, as we'll see—and they automatically assume this is identical to “Southern slavery.”

On the other side, critics from within—that is, within the church—may recoil at biblical references to God's severity and forcefulness (“violence”); they emphasize God's kindness and love, as displayed in Jesus on the cross. These insider critics consider this Old Testament severity to be a mistaken portrayal of God by fallen, violence-prone biblical authors and prophets. Yet we'll see that New Testament authorities—and even Jesus himself—carry on the severity that most people restrict to the Old Testament. Jesus viewed himself as carrying on the calling and task of those prophets.

In light of the dual biblical affirmation of God's kindness and severity (Rom. 11:22), for our critics from *without*, we want to emphasize that *God is far more loving, kind, patient, tender, and merciful* than we could ever know. Throughout

the Old Testament we see language of God attempting to woo his people back to himself (Hosea 2:14), being hurt by their rebellious hearts (Ezek. 6:9), longing to show mercy (Isa. 30:18) and to provide for them (Ps. 81:10–16), and pleading with them to return to him (2 Chron. 36:16). He patiently waits half a millennium (from the time of Abraham to the time of Joshua) to bring judgment on the “disobedient” Canaanites (Gen. 15:16; Heb. 11:31), and he is willing to relent in judgment if *any* people turn from their wickedness (Jer. 18:7–8; Jon. 4:2).

And for our critics from *within*, we emphasize that *God is more severe and harsh and unsafe* than they suggest. For those who oppress, dehumanize, defraud, mislead, and live hypocritically, divine wrath is the appropriate, just response, as it is to other objective moral evils. Thankfully, the God-created world we inhabit is one that guarantees cosmic justice will be done.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas has offered this critique of someone’s unorthodox view of God: “One of the things that bothers me about [his] God is that she is just too damned nice!”<sup>13</sup> Putting it another way, Garret Keizer writes, “The Lord my God is a jealous God and an angry God, as well as a loving God and a merciful God. I am unable to imagine one without the other. I am unable to commit to any messiah who doesn’t knock over tables.”<sup>14</sup>

The former nun Karen Armstrong wrote rather simplistically: “It is wonderful not to have to cower before a vengeful deity, who threatens us with eternal damnation if we do not abide by his rules.”<sup>15</sup> Conor Cunningham—a religious scholar—responded: “Imagine if Hitler rather than an ex-nun had written those words.”<sup>16</sup> To stress either divine kindness or divine severity at the expense of the other results in a skewed moral picture. Neither the critic from without (like Armstrong) nor the critic from within strikes the right balance.

Not that I myself presume to have attained the perfect balance with all moral questions tidily resolved. But as we look especially at the critics from within, I find too many inconsistencies and a good deal of selectivity to affirm the direction they take. I wish things were as easily resolved as they suggest!

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#### EXCURSUS:

### A Quick Word on God and Violence

Before getting further underway, we should note that the Old Testament does not ascribe “violence” (*hamas*) to God or to righteous humans or nations using physical force in a righteous cause. Rather, that word is associated with wicked, law-breaking, oppressive human beings; they injure, wrong, or harm physically or nonphysically. Without creaturely sin and violence, divine wrath and judgment wouldn’t occur.

We could say that God uses *just coercive physical force* in response to human violence and oppression.<sup>17</sup> So even though we make reference to *divine violence* or *divine counterviolence* in response to human sin, keep in mind that such language is a concession to a conventional way of speaking. Scripture itself doesn’t refer to God as *violent*.

---

Table 1.2. Responding to Critics from Without and Within

| To critics from <i>without</i>   | To critics from <i>within</i>                            |
|--|--|
| God is more loving, kind, patient, tender, and merciful than we could imagine. | God is more severe, harsh, and unsafe than they suggest. |

### ***Ragged Edges and Rough Pathways***

In this book, we walk with the Old Testament as a friend—but over rough terrain and through slime pits. It reveals both an *idealism* of hoped-for peace and order and a *realism* about its ancient Near Eastern setting.<sup>18</sup> Thus, some of these Old Testament laws will “push society as far as it could go at that time without creating more damage than good,” even if it “can and should ultimately go further.”<sup>19</sup>

Another matter: *we shouldn’t be surprised if some people may simply disagree about certain moral assumptions about what a good God once commanded under certain conditions and at a certain time and for certain reasons perhaps known only to him.* This doesn’t mean reversing good and evil altogether. It does mean a divine command from a good God may still be *very difficult* and severe even if it isn’t *intrinsically evil*. To command intrinsic evil would be impossible for God (Jer. 19:5).

Some critics from within may hold that certain divine commands are merely *difficult*, not *impossible*—while others may consider those commands just plain *impossible*. Kenton Sparks admits that *he’s not sure* if God really commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.<sup>20</sup> Greg Boyd says God *did* issue this command, even if the command seems troubling when taken on its own without any additional historical context.<sup>21</sup> Randal Rauser says God *couldn’t* have done so,<sup>22</sup> even though the New Testament itself takes for granted that this was God’s command (Heb. 11:17–18; James 2:21–23).

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#### EXCURSUS:

### **Moral Intuitions and Harsh Divine Commands**

Let’s briefly examine Rauser’s denial that God issued this command to Abraham. Rauser appeals to our basic moral intuitions to justify this claim: we just have this basic instinct that such a command is immoral. Although Matthew Flannagan and I deal with this objection in detail elsewhere,<sup>23</sup> I would say here that I readily agree that, *in general*, we ought to pay attention to these intuitions. However, a *good, wise God may make rare, highly specified, authorized exceptions for morally justifiable reasons*. Such exceptions don’t imply that good and evil are utterly reversed or that we should therefore abandon those basic intuitions.

Rauser appeals to the Christian legal philosopher J. Budziszewski’s fine work on conscience and moral intuitions to support his claim.<sup>24</sup> However, even Budziszewski makes room for certain divinely authorized exceptions, including both the sacrifice of Isaac and the driving out the

Canaanites. If a supremely good God, who is the author of life, has morally sufficient reasons for issuing this unusual, difficult command to Abraham, then “God is not commanding Abraham to commit murder.”<sup>25</sup> This God is the *source* of moral duties, but he himself doesn’t *have* duties. Further, he can make certain exceptions concerning the laws of human nature that don’t destroy the integrity of the larger truth that he has ordained—namely, the created order. That is, God can issue these commands without acting contrary to his own nature or overturning the created natural order. In addition, Budziszewski, following Thomas Aquinas, recognizes overriding exceptions to these general operations *must be based on clear divine revelation*, which is what we indeed have in Scripture.<sup>26</sup>

Isaiah notes that God, in his severity, rises up “to do his deed—strange is his deed! and to work his work—alien is his work!” (Isa. 28:21 ESV). God will sometimes resort to strange and alien things—deviations from his heart’s desire and from how things normally operate. And as the Christian novelist Flannery O’Connor maintained, such divine severity turns out to be a subversive means of redemption.<sup>27</sup>

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In the midst of all of these questions, remember that ultimately God will do what is good and just. He will not do otherwise. A perfectly good, all-wise Cosmic Authority will have justifiable reasons for commanding or permitting certain actions—reasons for which we don’t always have access.

## A Brief Postscript on the Critic from Without

Through social media, a Christian asked me if atheists had been convinced by previous arguments in *Moral Monster* and *Genocide*. I replied that, speaking anecdotally, I’ve found that various atheists have indeed been persuaded to see that Old Testament laws on “slavery” were a far cry from what was practiced in the antebellum South and that Old Testament warfare texts utilize exaggeration or hyperbole and can’t in any way be considered “genocide” or “ethnic cleansing.” At any rate, those books—and this one too—are the type of book that may at least give helpful perspective to critics and questioners outside the Christian faith. They can help one put difficult Old Testament texts into a more understandable context, as well as minimize a number of common misunderstandings and barriers to belief.

The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. We should begin with the clear and then move to the unclear—rather than the other way around. Though I’ve written about this elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> in brief, begin with the Big Bang, which implies *theism*, and go to the historicity of Jesus’s bodily resurrection, which confirms the truth of the *Christian faith*—and then work out any of the difficulties or murky details from there. I’ll come back to these themes in the last couple of chapters.

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# Is the God of the Old Testament the Same as the God of the New? (1)

## *Marcion versus Moses*

Paul writes that Christians are no longer under the law of Moses but “under grace” (Rom. 6:14–15). That *doesn't* mean that Old Testament saints were saved by following the law. No, they were still *saved by God's grace through faith*. That includes Abraham, who lived *well before* the Mosaic law was even given. He *believed* God's promise (faith), and he was declared righteous by God's grace (Gen. 15:6). And *that* was before he was even circumcised (Gen. 17; cf. Rom. 4:1–14).

In fact, Genesis 26:5 uses the “Mosaic law” language of Deuteronomy, affirming that “Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.” To be saved by grace enables you to keep God's law—to live an obedient life that's pleasing to God. Hebrews 11 emphasizes the centrality of faith—trust in and allegiance to God—throughout the Old Testament.

This raises questions: Does the Christian then disregard the law of Moses and the rest of the Old Testament's ethical demands? What is the carryover to the New Testament?

This and the following chapters will examine the specific theme of the identity of the Old Testament portrayal of God compared to that of the New Testament. The present chapter looks at the ancient heretic Marcion's attempt to discredit Moses and the God of Israel. It concludes that he was seriously mistaken. What's more, the moral themes in the law of Moses—and the larger story of Israel—are woven into the New Testament's moral picture.

The next two chapters compare Moses and Jesus. Some of our critics from within will pit Moses against Jesus to create a wide moral gap between them. This is a misrepresentation. Moses and Jesus actually have much in common with each other, and the New Testament refers to Moses in highly approving terms.

## “Unhitching” the Old Testament from the New?

Pastor and author Andy Stanley’s book *Irresistible* claims that the New Testament must be “unhitched” from the Old. After all, the Old advocates misogyny (hatred of women) and treating women as property (“commodities”). It portrays God as “angry” while the New portrays him as “brokenhearted.” In the Old you could hate your enemy, but Jesus tells us to love our enemies. So if we don’t “unhitch” the Old, this will lead to all kinds of terrible things such as the “prosperity gospel, the crusades, anti-Semitism, legalism, exclusivism, judgmentalism,” and so on.<sup>1</sup> The Old Testament is the “culprit” here—a stumbling block to faith because people have used it to justify all kinds of abuses.<sup>2</sup> The solution Stanley advocates is basic: disregard all Old Testament commands, and stick with Jesus’s command to love. If we had followed Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), this hornet’s nest of Old Testament problems wouldn’t have arisen within Christendom.

Well, that’s both a sweeping and inaccurate statement. Consider, for instance, the Crusades and the various modern myths associated with them. (In *Genocide*, we mention five of them.)<sup>3</sup> Contrary to Stanley’s assumption, the Crusades were largely a defensive *just* war—a protective response to long-standing and ongoing Islamic aggression. What’s more, it was in fact *Jesus’s* own words—loving your neighbor, laying down your life for a friend—most often quoted to rally the troops to fight. It *wasn’t* Old Testament war texts.

What about anti-Semitism? The late distinguished Yale historian of theology Jaroslav Pelikan claims the opposite: anti-Semitism in the West is the result of “unhitching” the New Testament from its very Jewish roots.<sup>4</sup> Author and pastor Fleming Rutledge offers a similar counterpoint: “Many Christians continue, unthinkingly, to speak of ‘the God of the Old Testament’ as though this supposedly wrathful and judgmental God had been supplanted by an endlessly tolerant and indulgent Jesus. This ill-formed attitude is not exactly anti-Semitic, but it can be called into the service of anti-Semitism.”<sup>5</sup>

Paul tells us that “all Scripture”—by which he means *the Old Testament*—is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” so that the godly believer “may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). And for Jesus, to love God and others *expresses* the heartbeat of the Mosaic law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:37; cf. 7:12). Jesus and other New Testament authorities are regularly drawing on and applying that same moral heartbeat for the new covenant community. Love doesn’t run contrary to their message—and that includes expressions of wrath.

## Marcion Makes a Comeback

### *Marcion: Two Testaments, Two Gods*

What's the relationship of the Old Testament to the New? And how does the New Testament itself treat challenging, severe-sounding Old Testament passages? The Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria (ca. 184–ca. 253) *allegorized* some tough or harsh-sounding texts. Now, he did take the Noahic flood as literal and historical, but he is known for emphasizing the “deeper” moral or spiritual meaning in the Canaanite texts as a picture of spiritual warfare. In like manner, the Cappadocian church father Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 395) maintained that Jericho represented one's former way of life, which needed to be overthrown. But even so, these men believed in these Scriptures—along with the New Testament—as inspired by one and the same God.

By contrast, the heretic Marcion (85–ca. 160) interpreted these harsh texts in a more straightforward, nonallegorical manner. He concluded that texts about the wrathful, punishing God of the Israelite nation *couldn't* be inspired Scripture. That God seemed so unlike the good, enemy-loving heavenly Father whom Jesus proclaimed. Marcion created a chasm between the Old and New Testaments. He came up with his own anti-Judaistic “Bible” drawn from Luke and some of Paul's Letters.

### *Neo-Marcionism Today? The “Textual” and “Actual” Gods and the Chasm Between*

Has the long shadow of Marcion fallen across today's Christian landscape? A number of contemporary Christians like Andy Stanley, Greg Boyd, Peter Enns, Eric Seibert, Brian Zahnd, and others in the ballpark have been called “practical Marcionites”—as Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman puts it.<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, we can commend such modern-day authors for wrestling with difficult passages that we all find perplexing and troubling. And we should all wrestle honestly with the biblical text and also try to remove as many *unnecessary* stumbling blocks as possible so that others may understand and embrace the good news of the gospel. We also want to be careful about using labels carelessly or superficially.

On the other hand, we must not create stumbling blocks that remove the sting of divine severity and just retribution by minimizing and explaining away harsh texts and difficult commands issued by a good and just God himself. I am concerned with a rising number of thinkers within the church who have greatly reduced what counts as authoritative Old Testament Scripture—and even portions of the New Testament. *They have formed their own narrower canon* (i.e., authoritative Scripture)—a canon *within* the biblical canon. This certainly moves in the direction of Marcionism.

For Seibert, violent Old Testament Scriptures—and even New Testament ones—should be rejected as merely human; they are not authoritative or inspired. They can't be from God. For Boyd, severe (“violent”) and other harsh texts may



technically be Scripture, and even historically true, but they are solely the product of mere fallen, violence-prone humans: “Thus says *Moses*” or “Thus says *Joshua*”—but not “Thus says *the [actual] LORD*.”

Boyd’s “actual God” canon is purportedly shaped primarily by the “cruciformity” criterion: *the character of God is most clearly expressed when Jesus cries from the cross, “Father, forgive them.”* While this enemy-love does indeed express the heart of God, Boyd would have us think that divine harshness can’t be connected to God because this isn’t the “heart” of God’s character. This is a false dichotomy (cf. Rom. 11:22). Though not his “heart language,” God claims that “vengeance” belongs to him when humans defy him and dehumanize others. This too moves in the direction of Marcion.

Now the term “cruciformity” does remind us of Paul’s guiding principle of knowing nothing but Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). But when Paul hopes for assistance from the Roman military to physically protect him from a mob seeking to kill him (Acts 23:16–33), surely this wasn’t a violation of cruciformity. In any event, we’ll see that Boyd presents a *one-sided, narrow* slice of what the New Testament teaches about Jesus.<sup>7</sup> After all, *Jesus* engaged in coercive force when driving money changers from the temple (John 2:15); “*Jesus . . . destroyed*” unbelieving Israelites in the wilderness (Jude 5); and *Jesus* threatened to “strike dead” the followers of the false prophetess Jezebel (Rev. 2:23 NIV). These severe acts by Jesus are more than “Father, forgive them” on the cross; they look like the violence Boyd repudiates.

His fourteen-hundred-page book claiming God can’t act “violently” gives no actual definition of “violence.” He just assumes that “you know violence when you see it.”<sup>8</sup> Yet Boyd would consider “violent” the act of a police officer who moves—with potential lethal force—to stop an assault on a woman or to prevent a terrorist attack against innocent civilians. But many of us consider such responses to be right and appropriate—acts of neighbor-love . . . but more on this in the next chapter.

## Putting Moses in His Place

### *Moses—a Demonically Inspired Prophet?*

According to Boyd and other critics from within, Moses was a misguided, fallen, violence-prone prophet who often *misheard* and *misrepresented* God’s message.<sup>9</sup> Moses was more like a *demonically* influenced prophet when he commanded the Israelites to drive out and—if need be—fight against the Canaanites. After all, “what was regarded as heroic and God-glorifying in one epoch may turn out to be regarded as closer to demonic . . . in a later one.”<sup>10</sup> To drive this point home, the critic, Boyd, claims that Moses’s command to drive out the Canaanites violates the message of the cross and cruciformity. Because this runs contrary to Paul’s gospel (1 Cor. 1:18; Gal. 1:8–9) the only conclusion we can draw is that we should place Moses’s command “under God’s curse.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite this accusation, *nowhere* does Scripture indicate or imply that Moses was so utterly misguided. Indeed, a prophet who led Israel into immorality should be considered a *false* prophet, not a true one (Deut. 13:1–5). By contrast, *Moses was unlike any other prophet*; he knew God “face to face” (Num. 12:7–8; Deut. 34:10 NIV), and God repeatedly reminded Israel to listen to him (e.g., Num. 12:8; 16:28–40, 41–50). And Jesus and various New Testament writers confirm this. They speak with unqualified praise about Moses: “Moses was faithful in all [God’s] house as a servant” (Heb. 3:5; cf. Matt. 8:4; 23:2–3; Luke 16:31; John 5:45–46; 7:19). These authorities assumed that when Moses said “thus says the LORD,” this was the *actual* God. It wasn’t some *textual* God—a deity that was the product of a culturally conditioned, violence-prone, sinful prophet.

Following Jesus faithfully includes adopting his authoritative approach to the Old Testament. But get this: Boyd and other critics from within will even *reject*—or *ignore*—authoritative-sounding statements in the New Testament if these conflict with their narrowed version of cruciformity.

Like Jesus, Paul was aware that the law of Moses was not ideal. Nevertheless, he—like Jesus—still uses affirmative language about the Mosaic law: it is “spiritual” (Rom. 7:14) and “holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12; cf. 1 Tim. 1:8). Yet *the version of Moses we get from our critics from within makes it difficult to distinguish him—or Joshua or Samuel—from a false, demonically inspired prophet leading Israel to engage in wicked behavior in the name of the Lord*. But Old Testament prophets warned against those who just followed some imagined (“textual”) deity of their own making: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD” (Jer. 23:16 ESV).

### ***The Mosaic Law as a Booster Rocket***

So what does Jesus mean when he says that Moses *permitted* certain laws because of human hard-heartedness (Matt. 19:8)? Here are a couple of implications:

*Implication 1: Hard-hearted Israelites, not hard-hearted Moses.* Jesus viewed not *Moses* as hard-hearted and morally compromised but rather the *Israelites*, to whom God gave the law.

*Implication 2: Less-than-ideal laws.* Though the Mosaic law was *not intrinsically immoral*, *this wasn’t the perfect legislation for God’s people for all times*. This law expresses God’s tolerance for—and accommodation to—certain inferior moral conditions such as warfare, servitude, monarchy, and (many biblical scholars argue) polygamy.

Let’s explore the role of the Mosaic law a bit more.

First, *the law of Moses helped regulate and put a restraint on certain flawed conditions and institutions to keep them from getting out of control*. After all, laws

present *the behavioral floor* rather than *the lofty moral ceiling*. Laws express *the limits of tolerance rather than the ideal*. As Gordon Wenham puts it: “A study of the legal codes within the Bible is unlikely to disclose the ideals of the lawgivers, but only the limits of their tolerance: if you do such and such, you will be punished. The laws thus tend to express the limits of socially acceptable behavior: they do not describe ideal behavior.”<sup>12</sup> John Goldingay puts it this way: “Legislation by its very nature is a compromise between what may be ethically desirable and what is actually feasible given the relativities of social and political life.”<sup>13</sup> What is the ideal? To love God and others, find joy in God’s presence, imitate his character, and live humbly (e.g., Ps. 51:16–17; Amos 5:21–27). Mere law keeping isn’t the ideal.

Second, *the law, though imperfect, had an important preparatory place in Israel’s history*. Paul spoke of the law as a “tutor”—a schoolmaster—until Christ came (Gal. 3:24–25). N. T. Wright compares the law to a *booster rocket*, whose thrust is needed to take a spacecraft outside the earth’s atmosphere; when its task is accomplished, it is dropped off.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the Mosaic law was necessary to establish ancient Israel in its nationhood, theology, institutions, and moral practices, but once Christ and the new covenant came in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), the Mosaic covenant had completed its preparatory task (Rom. 10:4). Now new identity markers would characterize the interethnic people of God—the new Israel (Rom. 2:29–30; Phil. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:9).

Third, *the church as the “new Israel” is not “replacement theology” but “fulfillment theology.”* The church *does not replace* the Old Testament people of God but rather includes them. The uniting of Jew and Gentile in Christ is the *fulfillment* of God’s promise to Abraham to bless all nations through him.

Back to the booster-rocket image: once the law’s purpose had been accomplished, it was set aside as the covenantal identity marker of God’s people. We are under the new covenant ushered in by Christ. But this includes *much moral carryover* from the Old to the New. The same moral and spiritual fuel supply for the Mosaic booster rocket continues to fuel the new people of God by the same Spirit; he was necessary to sanctify and transform Old Testament saints as he does today. But instead of the bestowal of the Spirit on select individuals among God’s people, he is God’s mark and seal of *all* who belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9; cf. Acts 2:17–18). In addition, priestly mediators are no longer necessary since all believers are themselves priests before God, offering various spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Through Christ, each believer has complete cleansing and forgiveness (Heb. 9:13–14), a deep personal knowledge of God (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:11), and direct access to him (Heb. 4:16).

## Moving from Moses’s Covenant to Jesus’s Covenant

Behind these less-than-ideal Sinai laws is the assumption that humans sin and are enmeshed within fallen, sinful social structures. As a result, various Israelite laws fell short of God’s creational ideals rooted in Genesis 1–2:

- *male-female equality* (no patriarchy)
- *equal human dignity* (no classism, racism, master-slave, caste system, or other hierarchies)
- *permanent monogamous marriage* (no polygamy or sexual relations outside marriage)

While the Mosaic law wasn't given *to* us, it is still important *for* us as the new Israel. As we'll see, the new covenant brings with it a good deal of moral carryover for the Christian community.

So, what does this shift from Moses to Jesus look like?

### ***A Creation-Recovered Ethic***

Through Christ, the new covenant *recovers the creational ethic* of Genesis 1–2 (cf. Matt. 19:4–6; 1 Tim. 4:3–5). Through his resurrection, a new creation has begun (2 Cor. 5:17). Jesus is the *second Adam*—the “*new man*” (Eph. 2:15; 4:24; Col. 3:10) and the founder of a new, redeemed humanity.

### ***A Christ-Shaped Ethic***

As the descendant of Abraham, Jesus lived out ancient Israel's story as a faithful Israelite. He isn't only the second Adam, but he is the true Son that ancient Israel was not (Matt. 3:17). He came out of Egypt (Matt. 2:15), passed through the waters of the Jordan River in baptism (a second exodus), faithfully endured testing in the wilderness for forty days, and called a new Israel to himself (the twelve disciples).

The new covenant he inaugurated through his self-sacrificial death *informs the people of God to model their lives both on the incarnate Christ's exemplary life and service, his demanding teaching, and his self-giving death, and in light of the confident hope of the future bodily resurrection* (e.g., 2 Cor. 8:1–9; Phil. 2:5–11). We must follow not only the “old commandment” to love our neighbor but also the “new commandment”—to love one another *as Christ has loved us* (John 13:34; 1 John 2:7).

### ***A Covenant-Identity Ethic***

The old covenant was directed to *national Israel*. Its *ritual* laws such as circumcision and food laws served as typical boundary markers or marks of identification to distinguish Israel from the surrounding nations. By contrast, the new covenant is for *Jews and Gentiles in Christ*. Circumcision is no longer the mark of God's covenant people. Rather, it is God's Spirit who now indwells *all* of God's people, not just some of them, as under the old covenant (Rom. 8:9). And, as we've seen, each believer will have complete forgiveness, direct access to God's presence, and a personal knowledge of God: “All will know Me” (Heb. 8:11).

In terms of practices, instead of old covenant circumcision, *baptism* becomes the public initiatory rite and indicator of belonging to the Christian community. Instead of civil penalties, churches are to exercise *church discipline* (e.g., Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5:1–13). Instead of a select order of priests, *all* of God’s people are now priests with direct access to God, offering an array of spiritual sacrifices (e.g., Rom. 12:1; 15:16; Phil. 4:19; Heb. 13:14–15). Instead of the Mosaic distinction between clean (kosher) and unclean foods, Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19).

### ***A Continuationist Ethic***

The new covenant *reflects and extends the moral heartbeat of the old Mosaic covenant*. Some theologians have made this threefold (“tripartite”) distinction within Israel’s laws: *civil*, *ceremonial*, and *moral*. There’s something to it. But remember that even though national Israel’s *ceremonial* and *civil* laws were temporary, they were still *moral* matters: for Israelites to eat nonkosher foods or go uncircumcised was *immoral*.

That said, the old covenant ceremonial and civil laws don’t carry over to the new covenant people. Yet the general moral fabric woven through the Mosaic law and Israel’s story continues into the new covenant—especially the theme of loving God and loving others (Mark 12:30–31). In fact, the moral teaching of Jesus and Paul draws on the moral pulse of the Old Testament.

For example, nine of the Ten Commandments apply to Christ’s followers (e.g., Mark 10:19; Rom. 13:8–11; 1 Tim. 1:8–10).<sup>15</sup> The exception is the Sabbath law, which was rooted in the first creation (Exod. 20:9–11); it was fulfilled in God’s new creation, which began with Jesus’s resurrection (Rom. 14:5; Col. 2:16).<sup>16</sup>

To get even more specific, consider a passage like Leviticus 19:2–18: its moral themes are carried over in James 2:1–13; 5:4; and 1 Peter 1:15–22.<sup>17</sup> For example, when James warns employers against withholding payment from those who have worked in their fields, lest their cries ascend to the Lord (5:4), he is harking back to Leviticus 19:13 and Deuteronomy 24:15.

The Christian philosopher-theologian Gordon Graham argues that there is “no such thing as *Christian* ethics.”<sup>18</sup> One reason for this is that Jesus commanded and condemned the same sorts of things that Moses and the Old Testament prophets did. Furthermore, Jesus wasn’t saying something highly original or unique about loving God and loving others, including one’s enemies. In fact, Jesus didn’t so much add *content* to morality, but he *embodied* it and gave it *fuller meaning* through his unique identity—including his life, teaching, death, resurrection, and the kingdom he inaugurated.<sup>19</sup> Scholar Millar Burrows likewise notes: “Essentially. . . what Jesus taught was the ethics of the Old Testament, with some shift of emphasis but with no change of substance.”<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, C. S. Lewis claimed that the notion that the Christian faith “brought an entirely new ethical code into the world is a grave error” since “its Founder,

His precursor (the Baptist), [and] His apostles came demanding repentance and offering forgiveness, a demand and offer both meaningless except on the assumption of a moral law already known and broken.”<sup>21</sup>

Also, because sin and evil persist within societies, the emphasis on the just use of coercive physical force continues into the New Testament, though this emphasis is diminished. Just force is a means of maintaining the public good (e.g., Acts 23:12–25; Rom. 13:1–8; 1 Tim. 2:1–2). This comes not through the church but through government officials who are commanded by God to preserve the peace, protect the innocent, and punish the guilty. This comes through just policing, a righteous judiciary, law enforcement that breaks up drug cartels and prostitution rings, and even just wars to protect innocent civilians and stop dehumanization and keep tyranny and terrorism at bay. Even if these officials don’t live up to their God-given duties, the alternative is not to abandon them but to improve and reform them for the public good.



In sum, we have begun to see that the Marcion-like language and categories in recent scholarship don’t reflect what either testament affirms. Nor do New Testament authorities—including Jesus—give us any reason to assert that Moses mishandled many of God’s messages and that he seriously misrepresented God’s intention for his people. In the next chapter, we look more closely at this theme—especially in our comparison of Moses and Jesus.

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## Is the God of the Old Testament the Same as the God of the New? (2)

### *Moses versus Jesus?*

#### No Leeway on the Textual God versus the Actual God?

##### *A Modern-Day Gap Factory?*

Perhaps you know of the “straw-man fallacy.” This is a logical misstep in which one attempts to construct or portray an opposing position in the worst possible light so that one can easily tear it down.

At least some who move in a Marcionite direction are doing this with Moses (see chap. 2). That is, they (a) take pains to *create as wide a gap as possible between the “textual” and the “actual” God* (effectively creating two “gods”), and thus (b) *construct airtight discontinuous and nonoverlapping compartments into which those two gods fit*. This produces dichotomies like hating enemies versus loving enemies, women as commodities versus women as equals, and so on. Creating these gaps without any stitch of nuance, however, renders the position all the more challengeable.

We can certainly commend our critics from within for trying to present God’s character in as *good* and *loving* a light as possible. Indeed, this is something I myself am undertaking in this book! But they keep divine severity and coercive force at arm’s length, as though Jesus’s death on a cross clearly eliminates that severity or the use of divine coercive force. However tidy that solution appears at first, this gap-creation and dichotomizing are straw men. It’s a lot easier to

dismantle divine severity if you are selective in your treatment of New Testament texts<sup>1</sup> and you dismiss a lot of “thus says the LORD” talk as the product of human fallenness.

### ***Slight Alterations?***

In the spirit of Andy Stanley’s call for “unhitching” the two testaments, theologian Greg Boyd claims that Jesus was *repudiating* the Mosaic law in the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . .”<sup>2</sup> Boyd claims Jesus “refuted” or “rejected” a number of Mosaic laws as intrinsically wrong and as too “harsh” or “meticulous,” in violation of God’s goodness.<sup>3</sup> Note a couple of concerns, however.

First, *Boyd allows no leeway in bridging the textual and actual God*. It’s either one or the other—but this distorts and overstates. More accurate is that Jesus, followed by Paul, *relaxed* certain Mosaic laws pertaining to the Sabbath, food laws, or circumcision; after all, the Abrahamic promise to Jew and Gentile alike (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; etc.) was fulfilled in Christ. Jesus-followers have new identity markers, different from those of God’s old-covenant people.

Second, part of the problem is that the critic from within (Boyd) turns Jesus’s *correcting* the religious leaders’ *misuse* of the Mosaic law into Jesus’s *rejection* of that law. Even if these laws prove to be “harsh” or “meticulous,” *Jesus gave no hint that these laws opposed divine goodness*. He routinely assumed they were divinely given by the *actual* God to national Israel for its own identity formation in preparation for the Messiah’s coming. The Messiah would fulfill and make fuller sense of those laws for his new covenant people.

Third, *Jesus adapted and modified these laws*, but he himself got pretty *meticulous*: “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19).

But let’s now examine the claim by Boyd—that swearing or oath-taking, calling for “an eye for an eye,” and God’s taking “vengeance” are refuted or contradicted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>4</sup> We’ll see more clearly a certain selectivity, the creation of various straw men and of an unfortunate and inaccurate gap between Moses and Jesus.

## **“You Have Heard That It Was Said . . . ; But I Say to You . . .”**

### ***Clumsy Oaths? To Swear or Not to Swear?***

Is it true that Jesus absolutely disavows vowing? Does Jesus tell his disciples to forswear swearing? Was *Moses’s* word to the Israelites—“fulfill your vows [*tous horkous*] to the Lord” (Matt. 5:33)—contrary to *Christ’s* command not to “swear



[*omosai*] at all” (5:34 NIV)? Is it literally true that *anything* that goes beyond “yes” and “no” is from the evil one (5:37)? Does that mean believers shouldn’t swear to tell the whole truth, “so help me God,” in a court of law?

Boyd claims that *any* vowing or swearing commanded by the Mosaic law is immoral: for example, “you shall . . . swear by His name” (Deut. 6:13). Allegedly, when God allowed this practice in Israel, he was only “stooping” to bear the sin of his fallen, hard-hearted people.<sup>5</sup>

Is that really the proper explanation? No. For one thing, *Jesus opposed casuistry—sophisticated oath-taking practices that, ironically, were mere escape hatches from truth telling*. A cultural equivalent would be a child’s crossing her fingers while lying to her parents; deception is justifiable with fingers crossed. What did Jesus have in mind? He expands on this truth-evasion charade in Matthew 23:16–22: swearing by the gold of the temple is a binding oath, but not if you swear by the temple alone—and so on.

Second, *in the New Testament, God, Jesus, and other authorities appropriate oaths, using the same language from the Sermon on the Mount*. For example, the New Testament reveals that the “actual” God swore to Abraham and David. And there’s more:

- Zechariah referred to “the oath which [God] swore [*horkon hon ōmosen*]” to our father Abraham (Luke 1:73).
- God “had sworn . . . with an oath” (*horkō ōmosen*) to David (Acts 2:30).
- God confirmed his word with “an oath” (*horkō*) (Heb. 6:17; also, “vow” [*euchē*] in Acts 18:18; 21:23; “oath” [*horkōmosia*] in Heb. 7:21, 28).
- Paul used oaths repeatedly, appealing to God as “my witness” (e.g., Rom. 1:9; 9:1; 1 Thess. 2:5), or solemnly declaring that he was telling the truth and not lying and that God/Christ was his witness (Rom. 1:9; 9:1; 1 Tim. 2:7).
- James referred to his brother Jesus’s oath prohibition (James 5:12), but James nevertheless urged Paul to join Jewish believers in making vows, which Paul did (Acts 21:23–26; cf. 18:18).
- Unfallen angelic beings even swore by God (Rev. 10:6).
- Jesus placed himself under oath at his trial (Matt. 26:63–64 NIV: “I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God”).

The biblical evidence clearly reveals that not *all* swearing is “from the evil one”—only the kind that attempts to evade truth telling. God’s own oaths and swearing by his name are not demonic. *Correcting misuse is not repudiation*.

### ***“An Eye for an Eye”: Judicial Punishment or Personal Vendetta?***

Our critics from within claim that Jesus repudiated Mosaic judicial punishments—“an eye for an eye.” That means the actual God could *not* have commanded

capital punishment in the Mosaic law.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Jesus calls us to “turn the other cheek,” “not resist” the evil person (Matt. 5:38–39), and love our enemies (5:43–44). God never commands harm, we’re told, and God’s judgment is never one of *retribution*; rather, it is *redemptive* and *restorative*.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, God’s great desire is to redeem and restore, but retribution isn’t off the table for those who persist in violating God’s commands. God would rather show mercy than bring judgment. He doesn’t afflict willingly (Lam. 3:33) but does so as a last resort. When we look at the example of Jesus himself, we see a number of important themes related to love, vengeance, and the use of coercive force.

1. *Jesus opposed a misuse of the law to justify personal vengeance.* Jesus wasn’t denying appropriate judicial punishment. Divine vengeance in Scripture is simply *retribution* or *redress*.<sup>8</sup> As in *Moral Monster*,<sup>9</sup> we’ll explore further how specific *eye-for-eye* references focus on monetary payments rather than bodily punishments (e.g., Exod. 21:22, 27). The *eye-for-eye* principle emphasizes *proportionality*. The punishment fits the crime. And divine justice is God rendering to all according to their deeds (Rom. 2:6; Rev. 16:5–6). If redemption beyond this is possible, wonderful, but this doesn’t eradicate the minimum of just punishment.

2. *To “turn the other cheek” is the response not to violence but to an insult.* In biblical times, cheek-striking wasn’t an act of violence; it was a shaming insult (Job 16:10; Ps. 35:15; Lam. 3:30; cf. Isa. 50:6). Jesus was essentially saying, “Don’t return insult for insult”—a point Peter makes as well (1 Pet. 3:9).

3. *Jesus himself didn’t literally “turn the other cheek” when struck, and he used force in the temple.* At his trial, Jesus asked, “Why do you strike Me?” (John 18:22–23). He also forcefully drove out money changers from the temple. Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount must be read alongside the life and teaching of Jesus as well as his words and actions elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Jude 5; Rev. 2:20–23).

4. *“Do not resist an evil person” (Matt. 5:39) is better understood as not resisting by evil means.*<sup>10</sup> After all, Jesus resisted evil people all the time, and he frequently challenged his religious opponents. What Jesus had in mind is what Paul picks up on: *no personal retaliation or returning evil for evil* (Rom. 12:17, 21).

5. *The Old Testament teaches both enemy-love and just punishment.* We’re familiar with Mosaic judicial punishments, but Moses also taught *love of one’s personal enemy* (Exod. 23:4–5; Lev. 19:17–18; cf. Prov. 24:17–18; 25:21–22). Moses *nowhere* commanded hating enemies, as some critics from within claim. As with other “you have heard it said” misinterpretations, Jesus here addresses the *misuse* of Moses to justify *personal* retaliation and hostility.

So, *enemy-love wasn’t original with Jesus*. Both testaments teach that (a) loving one’s personal enemy and (b) punishing a criminal can be done without contradiction. In Romans 12, Paul rejects *personal vengeance*, but in Romans 13 he affirms the state’s role as a “minister of God” and an official “avenger” (Rom. 13:4).

6. *The apostle Paul exhibited this personal-official distinction in Acts 23.* When a violent mob threatened the apostle Paul’s life, official state action was necessary.

Paul told his nephew to inform the commanding Roman officer about this plot. Paul received a military escort out of Jerusalem to Caesarea. He didn't turn the other cheek with a *personal* enemy who insulted him. Rather, he made an *official* appeal to the Roman government to do its job and protect an innocent civilian from harm, even if this required lethal force. And because Paul was a Roman citizen, he insisted on the right to be treated like one (Acts 16:35–39; 22:23–29). Even so, whenever Paul was imprisoned, he used it as an opportunity to proclaim the gospel (e.g., Phil. 1:13).

7. *To claim that the “actual” God didn’t command capital punishment through Moses is false.* Capital punishment was the maximum penalty under the Mosaic law, but, as we’ll see, it was only mandatory in the case of murder; otherwise, monetary payment was possible. Nevertheless, Jesus confirmed *actual* God-issued capital punishments in the Old Testament: rebellious children who cursed their parents were to be put to death according to “the commandment of God” (Matt. 15:3) and the “word of God” (15:6). Boyd is simply incorrect in saying that the actual God didn’t command capital punishment and that Jesus was just using irony in exposing the religious leaders’ inconsistency.<sup>11</sup> That’s incorrect for several reasons: (a) In this passage Jesus also included *honoring one’s parents* as God’s “word” and “commandment” alongside *putting to death*. (b) *Peter likewise assumed a divinely mandated death penalty in the Mosaic law*: the person who didn’t listen to the God-sent messianic prophet would be “destroyed” (Acts 3:23). (c) *The author of Hebrews speaks of the Mosaic law in this way*: “Every transgression and disobedience [under Moses] received a just penalty” (Heb. 2:2–3). The author adds: “Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses” (10:28). Furthermore, God’s judgment is even more fearful and severe than Mosaic capital punishment (10:29; 12:25).

8. *Jesus himself was involved in severe judgments and “violence” against the wicked.* We’ve seen that Jesus rejected *personal* retaliation but nevertheless resisted evil persons and actions. *Outside his Sermon, Jesus himself forcefully resisted evildoers*: (a) he made a whip, overturned tables, and drove out money changers from the temple, and “He would not permit anyone to carry merchandise through the temple” (Mark 11:16); (b) he, “*Jesus*”—yes, that’s in our best Greek New Testament manuscripts—not only “[saved] a people out of the land of Egypt” but also “afterward *destroyed* those who did not believe” (Jude 5); (c) he forcefully confronted Saul, the persecutor of Christians, striking him blind as he was thrown from his horse (Acts 9:3–9); (d) he (“the hand of the Lord”) struck Elymas blind (Acts 13:11); (e) he threatened to “strike . . . dead” (*apoktenō en thanatō*) Jezebel’s followers after promising to cast the false prophetess on a sickbed (Rev. 2:20–23 NIV).

9. *Critics from within who attempt to evade actual-God judgments in the New Testament tend to be selective.* Some critics from within will try to wriggle out of particular New Testament divine-judgment texts by saying that God merely withdrew his life-sustaining power in the death of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts

5:1–11)—or that Peter misused his God-given power against them; the *actual* God didn't directly take their lives. They make similar claims regarding Corinthian believers who were sick or died because they abused the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:30).<sup>12</sup>

However, *since Jesus elsewhere uses coercive force—and lethally so at times—why not in these other cases?* After all, “the hand of the Lord” that brought about early church conversions (Acts 11:21) was the *same* “hand of the Lord” that struck Elymas blind (Acts 13:11). And the *same* “angel of the Lord” who delivered Peter from prison (Acts 12:7) caused worms to bring about King Herod Agrippa's death—in that same chapter (Acts 12:20–23)!

The book of Revelation contrasts the evil “beast” with Jesus, the innocent slain “Lamb” (Rev. 5:6, 12; 13:8), but it refers to the severe “wrath of the Lamb” (6:16; cf. God's wrath in the presence of “the Lamb,” 14:10). Just as Hebrews 2, 10, and 12 remind readers of a “terrifying expectation of judgment” for those who repudiate God's gift of salvation in Christ (10:27), Revelation portrays divine wrath in similar terms. Indeed, Jesus is connected to coercive force (e.g., Rev. 2:16, 23; 6:16–17; 14:10).

True, Revelation uses violent *metaphors*—plagues (15:1–8), bowls of divine wrath poured out (16:1–21), the winepress of God's great wrath (14:19; 19:15), the great supper of God (19:17). Some scholars suggest that these metaphors somehow make God's/Jesus's wrath *less* severe. However, *they don't show how this is so*: “Violent metaphors don't somehow become non-violent just because literal language isn't used.”<sup>13</sup>

The next chapter continues the Moses-versus-Jesus discussion: vengeance, severity, and the difference between “it is written” and “you have heard it said.” Then we'll draw some of these threads together.