

# Human And Divine Violence Problems in The Old Testament

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## Abstract

*In the Old Testament, there are several verses that support the existence of violence and warfare, which can be subject to debate. A theological explanation within the appropriate context is necessary to understand that God, in both the Old and New Testaments, is an unchanging God of mercy and holiness. The research conducted follows a descriptive-analytical approach. The study findings demonstrate that God remains consistent in His character. Violence is an expression of God's wrath when humans go against His laws. He is a God who hates sin and opposes those who refuse to repent. It is not humanity's task to demand that God conform to standards like His creation. As creations, our task is to understand His character and seek reconciliation with Him. Through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, reconciliation between God and humanity was made possible, as all of God's wrath was poured out on the cross.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The sixth commandment states, "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13). Not surprisingly, murder is a crime all over the world. But is violence always evil? Does it matter who the perpetrator is? Does the motivation matter? To say that violence is always evil is to forget that someone like Adolf Hitler could only have been stopped by using violence. The Hitlers and Osama Bin Ladens of this world are prepared to wipe out millions of people if they are not stopped, and the only way to stop them is by resorting to violence, for the only language such people understand is the language of violence. In general, the perpetrator is always at fault, but the defender or the person who tries to mitigate the havoc being committed is justified. For that reason, while premeditated murder is a crime, it is not a crime to kill an intruder who comes into your home determined to rob you of as much of your belongings as possible and even

to kill as many people as possible.

Many Christians are shocked to read passages in the Old Testament that talk of God killing thousands of people and even commanding the wiping out of nations. Such Christians are prompted to apologize on God's behalf for such violence. Many then resort to the dichotomy that the God of the Old Testament was an angry, violent God (Stephen J. Stein, 2006), while the God of the New Testament is a merciful God. They would urge people to ignore the God of the Old Testament and to embrace the God of the New Testament. But it is a fallacy to state that the Old Testament is devoid of mercy and that the New Testament is devoid of violence.

God says that He does not change;

For I am the Lord, I do not change. (NKJV, Malachi 3:6).

Expressing the same sentiment, the writer of Hebrews states that, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). So we should resist the temptation to pit the God of the New Testament against the God of the Old Testament.

Far from being devoid of mercy, the Old Testament is replete with instances of God's mercy. The prophet Jonah was angry about how merciful God was. Jonah stated that he tried to run away from God because he was afraid that if he (Jonah) went to preach to the people of Nineveh and they repented, God would forgive them. Jonah actually said that he was proved right (see Jonah 4:2). The clarion call of God's word--- Old Testament as well as New Testament---is that whosoever will may come (See, for instance, Isaiah 55:1; Rev. 22:17). It is not only in the New Testament that the father of the prodigal son has his arms wide open to welcome the wayward son back home. Time and time again, God called on the stiff-necked Israelites to return to Him (See, for instance, 1Kings 18:21; Ezekiel 18:30-32). God also showed that even the Gentiles were welcome to come to Him, and they would be accepted in exactly the same way that the Israelites were being accepted.

When people see our Lord commanding us to "love [our] enemies" (Matthew 5:44), there is the tendency for many to think that this is a New Testament concept that is foreign to the Old Testament. Actually, when our Lord quoted "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39), he was quoting Leviticus 19:18. Also, in his letter to the Romans (in Romans 12), Paul would quote from Proverbs in urging love for one's enemies;

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you." (Proverbs 25:21-22)

Conversely, it is not only in the Old Testament that we see God reacting harshly to sin and its perpetrators. Our Lord's depiction of hell in the New Testament is graphic and frightening.

What is needed then is a view of God which consistently explains when and why God uses or allows violence in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament. When God is the One leashing out or commanding violence, it is always in response to blatant and unrelenting sinning. The prophet Habakkuk described God as One who was “too pure to behold evil and cannot look on wickedness” (Habakkuk 1:13). It must be borne in mind that God hates sin so much that He and sin cannot co-exist.

God hates sin, but He wants His wayward people to return to Him. God describes Himself as One who shows mercy, “showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Exodus 20:6). The mercy that He shows to those who love Him is also extended to anyone who would repent, for God declares in Ezekiel,

If a wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed, keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die.

None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness which he has done, he shall live.

Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? Says the Lord God, “and not that he should turn from his ways and live?”....“For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live.” (Ezekiel 18:21-23, 32)

This paper brings out some instances of God’s mercy in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament and instances of violence in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. The intention is to show that the God of the New Testament is the same God of the Old Testament in His showing of mercy and use or allowance of violence. The explanation is given that in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, it is God’s hatred of sin that fleshes itself out as God’s fury toward sin. What we see then is ‘violence’ against sin and the unrepentant sinner, not violence for the sake of violence.

## II. METHODOLOGY

A descriptive-analytical approach used in research involves gathering and analyzing data to provide a comprehensive and detailed understanding of a particular topic or phenomenon. In the context of this research, a descriptive-analytical approach would aim to describe and analyze the various aspects related to violence in the Old Testament. The relevant information includes studying specific passages, historical accounts, and considering the cultural context in which these events took place. The approach involves a thorough examination of data, thoughtful analysis, and interpretation to shed light on the topic of violence in the Old Testament. By

employing this method, the researcher aims to provide valuable insights into the subject matter and contribute to the scholarly understanding of the topic.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Violence in the Old Testament

Anyone who reads the Bible is struck by the amount of violence in the Old Testament. In the days of Noah, mankind had got so sinful that God used a flood to wipe out all of mankind, with the exception of Noah and the other seven members of his family (Genesis 6 – 8). The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were so sinful that God sent his angels to rescue Lot and his family—Lot and his two daughters, as it turned out—and to destroy the cities with brimstone and fire (Genesis 19). Other sinful neighboring cities of the plain—Admah and Zeboiim—were also destroyed (In Deuteronomy 29:23, Moses listed Admah and Zeboiim, along with Sodom and Gomorrah, as the cities that “the Lord overthrew in His anger and His wrath”). Zoar was spared only because Lot pleaded with the angels to allow them to seek refuge there (See Genesis 19:15-21).

God used ten plagues to punish Pharaoh and his people in Egypt for afflicting the Israelites. The tenth and last plague was the killing of Egyptian firstborn sons. Pharaoh drove the Israelites out of Egypt only to change his mind and send his army after them. God would destroy Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea (Exodus 1 – 14). When the Israelites worshiped the golden calf by Mount Sinai (also known as Mount Horeb), Moses was so angry that he commanded the Levites who came to him to kill as many of the people as possible, and three thousand people died that day (Exodus 32). When many Israelite young men committed fornication with the women of Moab and then worshiped Baal of Peor with them at Shittim, twenty-four thousand of the Israelites were killed as punishment (Numbers 25).

God commanded the Israelites to annihilate the sinful inhabitants of the Land of Canaan which they were to possess. Total destruction was what they were to execute (Deuteronomy 7). When Achan’s sin of stealing some precious goods in the Battle of Jericho resulted in the defeat of the Israelites in the first battle of Ai, Achan and all the members of his family were stoned and then burned.

During the reign of King Hezekiah in Judah, as the mighty army of King Sennacherib of Assyria besieged Jerusalem and they were taunting Hezekiah and even blaspheming against God, God sent an angel who killed one hundred and eighty-five thousand of the Assyrian soldiers to thwart their ambition and humble them (Isaiah 36 – 37).

The above examples of violence (and others) are so glaring that many people are prompted to think of the God of the Old Testament as a God of violence. What many people forget is that the New Testament is not devoid of violence.

#### 3.2 Violence in the NT

Our Lord's description of hell paints the picture of unabated suffering. He referred to the fire of hell as "the fire that shall never be quenched—where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:34-44, 45-46, 47-48). In our Lord's parable of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar, our Lord talked of both Lazarus and the rich man dying. Lazarus was "carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom," while the rich man found himself "in torments in Hades" (Luke 16:22-23). The rich man saw Abraham at a distance and Lazarus in his bosom. In his first plea, the rich man said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame" (Luke 16:24). The rich man was saying that the torment was so severe that even Lazarus' dipping his finger in water and walking a distance to help to cool his tongue would give him some relief. Our Lord also described hell as a place of "everlasting punishment" (see Matthew 25:46) where there would be "wailing and gnashing of teeth" (see Matthew 13:42, 50).

The Epistle of Second Peter gives a stern warning to those who presume that they will get away scot-free with their sinfulness:

For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment; And did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; And delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked... Then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment. (2 Peter 2:4-9)

Jude enjoins believers, saying, "And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh" (Jude, vv. 22-23).

Our Lord's parable of the wheat and the tares explains why violence is not readily seen in the New Testament. The principle is to let the wheat and the tares grow together for now:

Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn." (Matthew 13:30) While explaining the parable of the wheat and the tares, our Lord would spell it out, saying,

The Son of man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 13:41-42)

The reality of this eternal punishment is made more graphic in the elaborate vision that the risen and exalted Lord showed to the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos (In Revelation 6-18, the Apostle John describes the horror that will be unleashed on the sinful world with the opening of the seven seals, the blowing of the seven trumpets, and the pouring out of the seven bowls of wrath).

### **3.3 Mercy in the NT**

People think easily of the mercy of God in the New Testament. An indelible picture of the mercy of God comes from our Lord's parable of the prodigal son. In that parable, the father runs to meet his son coming back home after leading a wayward and wasteful life. The father does not care that it is not dignifying for him to run in that way (Luke 15). The message being conveyed is that no matter how sinful you may be, if you come to the Lord, He is prepared to receive you.

Paul expressed the mercy of God beautifully:

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). (Ephesians 2:1-5).

God's mercy is clearly shown in the sentiments expressed in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

It was an act of mercy or grace that God sent His only Son to come to this world to suffer and die on the cross to save us from our sins. Our Lord would point out: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13).

### **3.4 God's Mercy in the OT**

While the mercy of God is easily seen in the New Testament, many forget about the fact that the mercy of God shines forth in the Old Testament also.

Even when we see God using violence to punish people, we see elements of mercy peeking out. When God sent the flood in the days of Noah, in His mercy He saved Noah and seven other members of Noah's family (See Genesis 6-9). When God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, He sent His angels to save Lot and his family. Come to think of it, the angels were not there to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah; they were there specifically to rescue Lot and his family as they destroyed the cities. Their main mission was to ensure that Lot and his family would not be destroyed along with the sinful people of those cities. Only Lot's wife would be turned into a pillar of salt for



her disobedience (Genesis 19).

When the Israelites worshiped the golden calf by Mount Sinai in the wilderness, God wanted to wipe out the people and to make Moses into a nation greater and mightier than Israel. However, when Moses interceded on their behalf, God listened to Moses' intercession and in His mercy did not wipe out the people (Exodus 32). Similarly, at Kadesh-barnea when the Israelites demonstrated their unbelief, not believing that God would enable them to conquer the land of Canaan, God wanted to wipe them out, but once again Moses interceded on their behalf, and once again in His mercy God did not wipe them out. He simply punished them by keeping them in the wilderness for a total of forty years, and He kept that generation from inheriting the Promised Land (Numbers 13-14).

In Exodus, God describes Himself as a merciful God:

For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:5-6)

In the Period of the Judges, God showed His mercy over and over again. The Israelites would sin by worshiping idols, God would punish them by allowing an enemy of theirs to defeat them and to oppress them, the Israelites would cry to God in repentance after some years of oppression, and God would listen to their cry. God would raise someone up (a judge) to lead the Israelites to victory against the enemy. That person would deliver them, and the people would worship God again, but only until that judge died, and then they were back to their old ways of worshiping idols. The Israelites kept repeating this cycle, yet God kept on listening to their cries when they would repent. That was mercy indeed! (The pathetic cycle that the Israelites went through during the Period of the Judges is described in Judges 3-16). It was an act of God's mercy that He kept using His prophets to convince his people to forsake the worship of worthless idols and to return to Him but, for the most part, the people did not listen to the prophets. During the reign of Ahab, king of the Northern Kingdom (Israel), Elijah had his contest with the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. Elijah upbraided the people, saying, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him" (1Kings 18:21).

In Isaiah 1, a merciful God cried out:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: "I have nourished and brought up children, And they have rebelled against Me; The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; But Israel does not know, My people do not consider (Isaiah 1:2-3)

In the Song of the Vineyard, God asked,

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes? (Isaiah 5:3-4)

Jeremiah also expressed how disappointed the merciful God was in the rebellion of his people:

For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, And hewn themselves cisterns—broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jeremiah 2:13)

So merciful is God that He does not like to see anyone perish on account of disobedience. That is made clear in Ezekiel:

For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies, says the Lord God. Therefore, turn and live. (Ezekiel 18:32)

Hosea's prophetic ministry was all based on God's mercy (hesed) for His people. In Hosea, God cried out;

I taught Ephraim to walk, Taking them by their arms; But they did not know that I healed them...  
How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim?  
My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. (Hosea 11:3-8)

Jonah was convinced that God was too merciful. Jonah did not want to go on God's errand to warn the people of Nineveh, because he was afraid that the people might repent, and he knew God enough to know that should they repent, God would not destroy the city. He sought to flee from God's presence, but to no avail. After God got his attention in a dramatic way, God called Jonah a second time to go on the errand, and Jonah reluctantly went. To Jonah's surprise and displeasure, the people of Nineveh repented of their sins, and the merciful God decided not to destroy the city. Jonah was angry that God had forgiven the people of Nineveh, and he told God that his biggest fear had been realized:

Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm (Jonah 4:2, emphasis added)

When Jonah was upset and angry enough to want to die because of the withering of the plant God had caused to grow to give him some shade, God would spell out to Jonah the lesson He wanted Jonah to learn from his experience with the plant:



You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock? (Jonah 4:10-11, emphasis added)

Many people do not know what Jonah knew about God, and many certainly have not learned the lesson God wanted Jonah—and us—to learn from Jonah's experience with the plant.

One of the lessons God wanted Jonah, and us, to learn is that His mercy is not for the Israelites only. His mercy has always been available to anyone who would repent. That was why His mercy was extended even to the wicked people of Nineveh. Previously, God's mercy had been extended to the likes of Ruth, the Moabitess. Even though Ruth was from Moab where they worshiped idols, she had come to the point of realization that the God of Israel was the only true God, and she was willing to accept that God as her God, for she was able to say to her mother-in-law, Naomi, "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16).

For anyone who would attempt to explain God's acceptance of Ruth by appealing to the fact that the Moabites were blood relatives of the Israelites (since they were descendants of Lot), it must be borne in mind that that explanation cannot be used for Rahab. Rahab was a prostitute from Jericho where they worshiped idols. She too had come to the point of realization that the God of Israel was the only true God, for she would say to the Israelite spies whom she had hidden, "the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (Joshua 2:11).

Should anyone wonder if the mercy God extended to the likes of Rahab and Ruth was to the same degree as that which He extended to the Israelites, he or she only needs to remember that God even put Rahab and Ruth in the ancestral line of our Lord (See Matthew 1:1-17). That was a demonstration of total acceptance.

### **3.5 Explanation of God's Use of Violence**

Why then does a merciful God use violence sometimes and command the use of violence at other times? The common thread that runs through God's use or command of violence, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, is that what we see as violence is God responding to blatant sin and to unrepentant people.

When God used the flood to wipe out all of mankind, with the exception of Noah and his family, it was on account of the sin of mankind. We are told:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. (Genesis 6:5-6)

The next verse in Genesis clinches the argument:

So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them." (Genesis 6:7)

God foretold Abraham that his descendants would someday occupy the land of Canaan. When God told Abraham this, Abraham did not even have a son. God said he would wait till the fourth generation to bring Abraham's descendants to the Promised Land, and He explained why this was going to be the case:

Then He said to Abram, "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years... But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." (Genesis 15:13-16, emphasis added).

The Amorites were the people of one of the nations that occupied the land of Canaan, but sometimes that name is used for all the nations that lived in the land of Canaan. They were a very sinful people. God was saying that He was giving the Amorites a very long rope for them to repent (which was because of His mercy), but the long rope He was giving them would come to an end. God would then be prepared to bring Abraham's descendants to wipe out the people and to occupy the land.

In Deuteronomy 7, Moses was relating God's command at a time when the long rope God had given the inhabitants of the land of Canaan had come to an end:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you... And when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them, Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be against you and destroy you suddenly. (Deuteronomy 7:1-4)

The annihilation of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan was therefore partly to punish them for their blatant sinfulness and partly to keep them from corrupting the Israelites.

Solomon would be the classic case of the disobedience of this command by God, for he married seven hundred wives and added three hundred concubines. Many of these women were princesses from the nations that worshiped all kinds of idols, and his pagan wives turned his heart away from God (see 1Kings 11). God's warning was borne out.

When God sent ten plagues—climaxing in the deaths of the Egyptian firstborn sons—on Pharaoh and his people in Egypt, it was to punish them for torturing the Israelites. The wiping out of Pharaoh's army was in punishment for Pharaoh's stubbornness in going after the Israelites even after finally driving them out of his country (See Exodus 11-12, 14).

Each time God killed thousands of Israelites, it was in punishment for some heinous sin. The perennial sin of the Israelites was the worship of worthless idols. They kept on being attracted to the worship of worthless idols that were powerless, could not hear, see, or walk. This was unimaginable spite of the Almighty God who had delivered them from Pharaoh and the Egyptians with a mighty hand, and who had continued to fight for them. Yet God did not withdraw His mercy from them.

Habakkuk found it difficult to understand why God would allow a pagan nation to oppress a nation of people who were at least more righteous than they were, but his picture of the holiness of God was accurate. He would say of God, "You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness" (Habakkuk 1:13). Evil is an affront to the One who God is and all that He stands for. The devil, who is antithetical to God, is the embodiment of sin, so God and sin cannot co-exist. God's response to unabated sin and the unrepentant sinner sometimes shocks us, but we must not forget that sin is revolting to God. That day is coming when God will deal a final blow to the devil and sin.

In the vision that the risen and exalted Lord showed to John on the Island of Patmos, the reality of the final reckoning of sin, unmistakable eternal punishment, is made glaring:

Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:14-15).

But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. (Revelation 21:8).

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

God did not change going from the Old Testament to the New Testament, He has not changed since then or now, and He will never change in the future. Paul described God as "the Father of mercies" (2 Corinthians 1:3), in other words, as the embodiment of mercies. But even in the Old Testament, God declared Himself as a merciful God (see Exodus 20:6), and over and over again God demonstrated that He was a merciful God.

The God of the New Testament is the same God of the Old Testament, and He is the same God today. God found sin revolting in the Old Testament, He found sin revolting in the New Testament, and He still finds sin revolting today. He has always held out His mercy, and continues to hold out His mercy, to anyone who would repent,

but those who persist in their sins and refuse to repent will sooner or later deal with God's hatred of sin. God has no apology to make for that, and we do not need to apologize on God's behalf. It is our place to understand who God is and to make our peace with Him.

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