

Can We Trust the God of Genocide?

Yes—if we set our eyes on the Cross of Christ. A pastor's response.

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Image: Illustration by Rick Beerhorst

I recently taught a Bible class at our local Christian school. I was assigned the topic, "Can the Bible Be Trusted?" I prepared well—a skillful blending, I thought, of watertight arguments, personal anecdotes, and historical underpinnings. I gave a whirlwind history of the development of the canon. I toted out comparative stats on existing copies of ancient documents. I addressed the old vexing problem of the mystery cults and their relationship to Christianity. I told those students how the Bible was a wise and trusted guide in my own life. I gave examples. I delivered it all with what I thought was conviction and verve.

It was a flop. The students could barely stay awake. I might have guessed the outcome from the get-go. I started with a question: "If anyone asked you why you trust the Bible, what would you tell them?"

It left them dumbfounded.

As I was leaving, a young man who had seemed especially bored in the class approached me in the hall.

"Thanks for coming," he said, surprising me. I asked him if I'd helped him answer the question, Why do you trust the Bible?

"No."

"Well," I said, "do you trust the Bible?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Hosea 13:16," he said.

"Remind me," I said.

With icy precision he quoted: "The people of Samaria must bear their guilt, because they have rebelled against their God. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open."

Now it was my turn to be dumbfounded.

John Milton opens Paradise Lost claiming to "justify the ways of God to man." It's questionable whether he succeeds. It's questionable whether anyone does. Most Christians give it a good shot anyhow. Most come up short. Our justifications start sounding like, well, justifications: labored attempts to vindicate God's character against mounting evidence for his seeming apathy, impotency, and incompetency.

But actually, that's the easy part. What's not easy is explaining what appear to be deliberate acts of divine cruelty. God's virulent rage. His hair-trigger vindictiveness. His apoplectic jealousy. Why would God make women and children pay for the sins of despots

or the apostasy of priests? God's behavior at times appears to the skeptic, and even to the devout, as mere rancor, raw spite. There are passages in Scripture that make God look like a cosmic bully throwing a colossal tantrum.

In light of this, it's hard to stick to the claim that God is love—unconditional love, love that seeks and serves and suffers and gives until it hurts. It's hard to reconcile the New Covenant God revealed in Jesus Christ, who welcomes little children, eats with sinners, speaks peace to troubled hearts, calls us to love our enemies, and lets adulterers walk away unscathed, with the Old Covenant God, who lays waste to entire cities, lets babies be dashed on rocks, opens the earth to swallow families whole, smites his own priests for just touching holy relics, and encourages parents to stone their own children for acting up. This is a pressing theological work of reconciliation.

But it's also a personal one. At its root, it raises the question, Can the Bible be trusted? Or more pointedly: Can the God of the Bible be trusted? Or more pointedly yet: Jesus, is that really you? Mine is one of three articles addressing this issue. The other authors, Christopher J. H. Wright and Phillip Cary, tackle it as theologians. I commend to you their essays, "[Learning to Love Leviticus](#)" and "[Gentiles in the Hands of a Genocidal God](#)." I want to approach it as a pastor.

Spanning the Covenants

In the 24 years I have been a pastor, I have operated on the fundamental assumption of the unity of Scripture. I understand, of course, the difference between the Old Covenant and the New, and how the work of Christ and the gift of the Spirit dramatically change how we relate to God.

But he's one and the same God. Jesus gives us a clearer and deeper revelation of God, but not a different one. The God Jesus spoke with and spoke for, the God he unveiled, is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I believe this. I preach and pastor on the basis of it.

So I happily flit back and forth between the Good Book's two halves. I mix and mingle from Romans and Isaiah, John and Genesis, Revelation and Nehemiah, James and Proverbs. I read Psalms as my own prayers. I consult Proverbs for daily wisdom. I'm as likely to take a leadership strategy from David's life as from Paul's, or to ponder the meaning of worship from Deuteronomy as from Hebrews. I'm careful to nuance my use of any biblical source, old or new, with the principles of good exegesis.

But I'm no closet Marcionite, a follower of the heretical bishop who claimed the god of the Old Testament was a demiurge, a lackey deity, and sharply distinguished that being from the heavenly Father whom Jesus revealed and Paul preached. I don't believe that. The God of Moses is also the God of Paul. They're one and the same.

But then there's Hosea 13:16. That seems as different from, say, John 3:16 as god is from God, as Marcion's demiurge is from our heavenly Father. Perhaps it is Hosea 13:16—"The people of Samaria must bear their guilt, because they have rebelled against their God. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open"—that Jesus' disciples had in mind the day the people in a Samaritan village refused them hospitality. "When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' "

God, in their minds, seems ready to loose mass destruction for such things.

"But Jesus," we're told, "turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village" (Luke 9:51–56). Jesus turns the other cheek, and makes his disciples turn theirs as well.

Is this a new thing? Is this a different God?

No.

Or better: This is a new thing from the same God.

The Heart of the Matter

But before we go there, consider for a moment how thin the gap really is between the revelations of God in the Old and New Testaments. God's mercy, his kindness, his pathos, is as marked in one Testament as it is in the other. And his dreadful wrath, his fierce justice, his burning jealousy for his people and his own righteousness—again, these characteristics of God are well represented in both covenants. It's worth noting that in order to make his case, Marcion had to excise not just the Old Testament, but a fair bit of the New as well.

Further, both Testaments narrate a kind of historical determinism. The brutality that Hosea describes is sickening, but hardly confined to some remote, barbaric past ruled by bloodthirsty chieftains at the behest of their cruel tribal deities. No, such brutality is happening somewhere in the world right now, often at the hands of those who are well educated and, in certain contexts, charming and sophisticated. But as then, so now: they commit such acts because, at root, "they have rebelled against their God." And as then, so now: it's often the women and children, the innocents, who suffer the consequences. In some ways, Hosea 13:16 simply announces a terrible historical reality: evil happens when men reject God, and often the wrong people suffer for it.

The problem here, though, is that Hosea 13:16 implicitly, and other texts explicitly, impute the agency of such acts to God. He's

the author and perfecter of the atrocity. He is the one pulling the levers, pushing the buttons—or watching it all happen with approval, like Saul holding the cloaks of the assassins.

Is that you, Jesus? we ask. Which takes us to the heart of the matter.

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Thus begins the Book of Hebrews. Over its 13 chapters, the writer builds a compelling case for Jesus' complete solidarity with frail and sinful humans and yet his utter superiority over everything that breathes—over angels, prophets, high priests, Moses. "In the past" is one of the book's refrains. "But now" is another. In the past, God spoke and acted through prophets, through angels, through priests, through Moses. But now, God speaks and acts through his Son, Jesus, who is superior to all others—who, indeed, is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

Jesus reveals God like no other. Jesus speaks for God like no other.

Hebrews draws a vivid contrast between past and present, Moses and Jesus, the Old Covenant and the New. In every way, Jesus—what he says, what he does, what he inaugurates, what he consummates—is superior to whomever and whatever has come before him. The past is a mere shadow of Christ's present reality and future glory.

But Hebrews sees no contrast in God. There is no Old Covenant versus New Covenant God. There is no God of Moses versus God of Jesus. Whoever wrote Hebrews was no Marcionite. All of this ties together as Hebrews wends toward its conclusion. There, the contrast between past and present, Moses and Jesus, Old and New rises to a brilliant crescendo:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:18–24)

Jesus ushers in a new day and a new way. In the past, we trembled before this God. But now we can approach him with joy, with confidence, with singing.

But he's the same God. Indeed, here's a surprise: The road is even steeper now, the judgment of God sterner, and the cost of refusal greater:

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? . . . Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God

acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire." (Heb. 12:25, 28–29)

Jesus opens a new way to the same God. But Jesus, rather than lessening the stakes, heightens them. His blood speaks a better word than Abel's, or any other's, but his message is only an intensified version of what God has always said: Do not refuse me when I am talking to you.

The Ultimate Nail House

I said I wanted to approach this as a pastor. My pastoral instinct is that this all resolves at the Cross. All talk of God must filter there. All views of God must refract there. All theology must converge there. At the Cross, God's own wrath falls on God. The God of the Old Covenant meets himself in the Christ of the New Covenant, and in a way superior to everything that has come before, he enacts a deep and lasting reconciliation.

Let me illustrate.

A worldwide phenomenon started in China about a decade ago. It's called a nail house—a house whose owner refuses to sell to developers. That refusal forces the developers to excavate and build around the house, often leaving it perched starkly, stubbornly, precipitously, on some rickety pedestal of earth. They're called nail houses because, in the scraped bald landscape over which they loom, they resemble a nail that never got hammered down. Pixar made an entire movie a few years back called *Up*, about just such a house and its crotchety, defiant, ancient owner.

In almost every instance, the developer gets a court order to demolish the house.

So a nail house is an act of doomed resistance. It's a gesture of hopeless defiance. It's a desperate last attempt to resist the

irresistible, to stop the unstoppable, to defeat the undefeatable. It's a lone fist shaken against a ruthless destroyer.

The Bible is a book of nail houses. But unlike almost all the nail houses around the world, it comes with a message of wild hope: Hold on! Don't give up! No matter how bleak it gets, how many fall to the right and the left, how inevitable your defeat seems, hold on! The high court of heaven rules in your favor. You win in the end. Think, for instance, of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, or David and Goliath.

But the ultimate nail house is the cross of Christ. That is history's most potent nail house, raised on a barren hillside in defiance of all the hellish despotism of the cosmos. And this time, the owner won.

But here's the strangeness of it: The Cross is mostly God's defiance of himself. God erects a nail house against his own wrath. What the Cross defies, what the Cross defeats, what the Cross pushes back, is as much the wrath of heaven as it is the power of hell. God disarms himself at Calvary. To put it another way: At the Cross, God made a way for his mercy and love to triumph over his justice and judgment.

The old theologians put it this way: We take refuge from God in God. The only escape from God's wrath is God's mercy. If you cling to his nail house, all God's wrath falls on the one nailed there.

And what rains down on your head? Grace upon grace upon grace.

Is that you, Jesus?

Thank God, yes.

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