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#155 Making sense of Old Testament violence

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom responds to listener Qs on Andy Stanley 'unhitching' Christianity from the Old Testament, the historicity of the Exodus, and the way that Greg Boyd interprets violent portraits of God in 'The Crucifixion Of The Warrior God'. First broadcast in 2019.

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Transcript

Hi there, before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways and I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that. It's called "Five Ways to Connect with God" and you can download it for free right now at PremiereInsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul.

So go right now to PremiereInsight.org/resources and download your copy. That's PremiereInsight.org/resources. The Ask NTY Anything podcast. Hello there, great to have you with me.

I'm Justin Brierley, Head of Theology and Apologetics for Premiere Unbelievable. Joined

once again by Tom for more of your questions. Well, what we've actually been doing in the last few episodes is digging out some great shows from early on in our archive, but next week you'll hear some fresh Q&As I've been able to sit down and record with Tom with your questions.

On this week's show, Tom responded to listener questions on US church leader Andy Stanley's comments on "unhitching Christianity" from the Old Testament, also questions on the historicity of the Exodus and the way that Greg Boyd interprets violent portraits of God in his book *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*. This show was first broadcast in 2019. In fact, when the show aired, Andy Stanley got in touch in the end and we ended up recording a separate show between him and one of his critics, Jeff Durbin, on how the Old Testament relates to the New Testament.

You can still find that in the archives over at our Unbelievable podcast from back in 2019, too. Anyway, lots of material, new and old from Premiere Unbelievable, it can all be explored at our website, PremiereUnbelievable.com. And if you register for our newsletter there, we'll send you a huge amount of bonus material from all of our shows, including 12 subscriber-only videos from the big conversation and access to five ebooks, believe it or not. So lots of reasons to go and register at premierunbelievable.com. We're starting it off with the Old Testament, which I find, especially among skeptics and people who have objections to Christianity, often gets turned to when they want to say, "Look at the God you worship." This comes up time and again on my other podcast show, *Unbelievable Issues Around Old Testament Warfare, Violence and so on*.

And there's a lot of questions that have come in from various people. We're going to get to some issues around a theologian called Greg Boyd, who may be familiar to many who's written an interesting piece on this lately. But let's start, Tom, with Gray in Charlotte, North Carolina and also Alex in Los Angeles, who both want to ask about Andy Stanley.

You may not be very familiar with him, but here's Gray, who says, "Andy Stanley, a popular mega church pastor and author in the United States, has recently published a book and given multiple talks to church leaders about the need for Christians to unhitch their faith from the Old Testament. He claims that we do not need the Old Testament in order for us to have a Christian faith, because our faith rests on a historical event, the resurrection, and not on the authority of an ancient book. What do you think about this proposal? Is this pseudo-marcianism? And you can explain who Marcian is in a boba.

And Alex also asks a very similar question. What do you think of that new book by understanding irresistible calling, the modern church to decouple or unhitch ourselves from the Old Testament/Old Covenant? It's kind of equal and opposite. And it may be, if all I know, that this man has written the book, is in reaction against those who say that unless Eve ate the apple on a certain time of a certain day, then our whole faith

collapses.

And he's just saying, "Look, for goodness sake, leave that behind and go with Jesus in the resurrection." And of course, Jesus in the resurrection, that's what Paul talks about on the area of the Gospels, in Athens. Paul didn't go back to the Old Testament at that point. However, Paul himself, when he sums up his gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 verses 3 and following, he says, "The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures." And he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

And when he's explaining to the Corinthians what the resurrection is all about, he draws on some 110, some 8, some 2, he draws on Daniel, he's pulling together all sorts of scriptural resources, Isaiah, etc. and particularly, actually also from Genesis 1, 2, and 3. First Corinthians 15 has a whole lot of that there. So saying you can uncouple, that's pretty difficult.

That's rather like, in the Merchant of Venice, Shylock's being given a pound of flesh, but he's then told he can't take any blood and game off. - Is it pseudo-marsianism as well? - Well, sort of. Marcium was a second-century heretic based in or around Rome, who taught that the Old Testament God was different from the New Testament God and that it's a form of dualism.

And one can see at a surface level, why? Because there are bits of the Old Testament which don't look like some of what we find in the new, we'll come back to that. But here's the point. Matthew and Marc and Luke and John, in the very different ways that they write their gospels, they tell the story of Jesus as the climax of the Old Testament.

They do it in subtle ways, but it's there all through. Matthew, perhaps most obviously, all this happened that it might be fulfilled. If you try and strip that out of Matthew, you won't be left with much, which is why Marcium only had Luke, and he didn't like all of Luke either.

And he only had then had Paul, and he didn't like all of Paul either. Because the early church is a Jewish movement whose whole resonant death is that what's happened in Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture. Now, it's not the fulfillment in the sense that Scripture gives you this great mountain, and Jesus is just a little can on the top.

It is something new which also challenges the way that Scripture is being read, as we see with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. But Jesus doesn't say on the road to Emmaus, oh, foolish ones and slow of heart, you were living in that silly old Old Testament. Let me tell you something news happening.

He said, you weren't reading it right. And that's the big difference. And so I haven't read this man.

He may be being misrepresented by the questioners. I may be misjudging him. I don't

want to judge him, but I want to say the church has always struggled with living with the Old Testament.

Different strategies for doing that have been tried from time to time. But that struggle continues, and I don't think it's going away. We will come to some of those big issues around the picture of God painted in certain parts of the Old Testament in a moment.

But Stu in Australia has a different question. He says, I've heard many theories regarding the historicity of the Exodus, ranging from the account being 100% historical to 100% mythical and everything in between. More recently, he says, Richard Friedman has proposed an interesting take that it was the Levites only that escaped migrated out of Egypt.

Do you have a take on it? Do you think two million plus Israelites escaped Egypt and entirely replaced the local Canaanite locals? Do you think the number might have been less? Was it just the Levites? Love to hear your thoughts. Okay. Tom, it is called Ask and To Write Anything, though.

Absolutely. No, these are great questions. I should say, professionally speaking, I'm an ancient historian from 200 BC to 280.

Whenever the Exodus happened, it's a long time before that. So I do not claim to be up to speed. I haven't read the recent research on this.

I do remember from years ago, running into questions about the date and the route and the numbers, et cetera. Did they go this way? That way? How long was it? And so on. And there's no doubt in my mind that the account in the Book of Exodus has been written up with considerable theological and literary artistry.

But like the Gospels, that doesn't mean it didn't happen, just that the Book of Exodus is not giving us and no serious readers should assume it does, a kind of what you'd have seen with a television camera perched on the edge of the pyramids, actually, as I talked to watch them all go. It's not that sort of a book, but that doesn't mean that nothing happens. We in our culture really struggle with this.

We think it must either be all absolutely, exactly as it happened, or it's all a lie. And people wobble on that. And really, you don't need to.

You need to learn to read the Pentateuch, the first five books, as a whole, see the story that's being told. And then the real focus is on rescue and law and presence. And the rescue from Egypt, it's very emphatic that the people of Israel know themselves to be the rescued slaves, the freed slaves.

That's just deep in the Jewish DNA. How that got there, if there wasn't an Exodus, I have no idea. But then also, the giving of the law, something happened which they all

construed as a meeting with the one true God.

But the giving of the law wasn't so now you'll know how to behave. It was because I want to come and live in your midst. And for that, you need to be sorted out because you're messed up at the moment.

And those things, again, are deep in the ancient Israel DNA, long before the time of King David and Solomon. And I'm not sure how they got there if there wasn't. In fact, something like this going on.

Now, that's a very general thing. I do not know about the numbers. I gather there are different theories about what the meaning of some of these ancient Hebrew words for numbers may be.

I confess I couldn't count up to 1000 in ancient Hebrew if you put me on the spot. I more or less recognize the words and I'm reading them. But so I wouldn't claim to know about that.

But I think please, let's look at what the story is actually saying and not at not getting stuck on the tiny details. Yes, again, I would recommend as well do for at least just one perspective on this from both a Christian and a skeptic. I did a very interesting program with Ted Wright of Epic Archaeology, unbelievable, looking at different theories around the Exodus and I think.

But I'll leave that in the next one. When I was originally studying, I found Old Testament Archaeology absolutely fascinating. For a few weeks, I thought, wow, maybe I should spend my life doing this.

And so I kind of look at that stuff. Rather like one looks at somebody with whom one was fleetingly in love. Yeah, that was really nice.

What does seem to happen there rather like the New Testament? From what I see, archaeological discoveries tend to confirm rather than disconfirm. Yes, that case can be overstated. Somebody gave me when I was young, a book called the Bible House History, the subtitle of something like, "Archaeology Confirms the Book of Books." So we found the flood and we found this and we've gone that.

And the answer is, yeah, actually, there's quite a lot of that. But there are always more questions. Archaeology is only ever a tiny bit of the evidence.

I said to the students yesterday in my seminar, we're still waiting for them to dig up two Philippians or three Corinthians. I'd like to know what Paul said about such a set. Or the ending of Mark or something like that.

Yes, absolutely. We can get that for like. Well, we'll do that in a later podcast, actually.

Someone's got a question on that. Okay, let's turn to this very serious issue, which is the warfare passages, especially violence in the Old Testament. We'll come to the Greg Boyd perspective on this in a moment.

But for now, Coburn into Coma, Washington, us, what are your thoughts on the conquest of Canaan and the instructions from God to his people to kill women and children in the process? I've always struggled to reconcile this. What looks like genocide with the mission of God's people being to love and serve the world. I'd love to hear how you've wrestled with that.

And what wider lens context or perspective you might have on the matter. And John asked the similar question briefly. How do you explain the horrific Old Testament accounts of God's judgment in the light of the New Testament change of emphasis? Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I wouldn't quite say the New Testament change of emphasis because that rather implies that what you have right through the Bible is a set of moral examples. And it's quite clear in many parts of the Old Testament that the story is not being told in any way as a moral example, as this is how you ought to do it goes. And that, of course, that comes to a low point at the end of the book of Judges with those horrific stories, which one hopes that nobody under the age of 21 would ever read, but I'm sure they do.

And so it's partly a matter of learning to read the Bible in terms of the whole sweep. And then it isn't a matter of, oh, well, the Old Testament says, okay, to do genocide. And then Jesus says it isn't.

It doesn't work like that. And I think all of this comes down to the fact that when God makes the good creation, he calls humans to be his partners in making creation what he wants it to be. And that's kind of built into Genesis one and two.

This is a world designed to work when humans are reflecting God's stewardship into the world. When the humans rebel, God doesn't say, oh, well, goodness, now that they've rebelled, we can't have humans involved with my plan. I have to do something quite different.

God sticks with the original plan, which means that when he calls Abraham, Abraham as he still is then, God calls somebody who he knows, God knows, and the narrator of Genesis knows is a very mixed up character. I mean, the story of Abraham oscillates from great moments of faith and obedience to disastrous moments of getting it wrong and cowardice and getting everything upside down inside out. So faith one minute and apparent unbelief the next and then back to faith the next.

And so the idea that Abraham is this great hero of faith, you know, when I was younger, people would give me books on the great men of faith and women of faith in the Old

Testament, as though the stories were all simple, going from one heroic thing to another. And you only have to think of David and Solomon and so on. See, no, they're not like that actually.

So that right from the start, God's Israel shaped plan, the Abraham and onwards plan, if you like, has built into it the fact that odd things are going to happen, which is something which God is eventually going to have to take responsibility for. And that's why I think the Old Testament as it stands remains deeply, deeply ambiguous. And actually, I think it's one of the things Jonathan Sachs was exploring in his recent book, *Not in God's Name*, where you get the Isaac and the Ishmael story.

And he points out that the Hebrew words that are used are designed to push the reader's sympathy all onto Ishmael, even though we know that Isaac is the one who's going to come out smiling at the end of the day. And likewise, as Jacob and Esau, it's as though the writers of Genesis and the other books are saying, this was how it had to be, but there's a deep ambiguity built in. And I think the Canaanite stuff is the most obvious example of that.

But then, when you read it from a Christian lens, part of the meaning of the cross of Jesus, it seems to me, is that the four gospels tell the story as this is how the whole story of Israel and the world gets funneled down onto one point. And it'll only work. You can only understand it if you say, this isn't just the story of a first century human being called Jesus.

This is the story of God himself taking responsibility, because he's made a world in which this was the only way that things could be dealt with. And now he's bearing it all himself. That I find not a comfortable thing, but then the cross is never meant to be a comfortable thing.

But it's a way of saying, when I see the story whole, and all the multiple tragedies, the Canaanite women, etc. And I see Mary at the foot of the cross and the sword will appear so, so, etc. That there's something whole about that, which then with the resurrection says, "And now that's been done, and we are starting a new world." And the Book of Acts is not about the church going out with swords and staves to beat everybody up.

It's about a different kind of mission entirely. Hi there. Before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special ebook we're releasing this month called *Critical Race Theory and Christianity*.

This ebook draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Rasselberry, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, "Has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church, or is white privilege a problem in the church?" And, "Is critical race theory compatible with the gospel?" I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful ebook as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today, the

ministry that brings you this podcast each week. You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs, like this one, are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you. Without your generosity, none of this would be possible.

So please, go to premierinsight.org/give and make a donation today. That's premierinsight.org/give. And don't forget to download our newest ebook *Critical Race Theory and Christianity* as my special thank you. A lot of people, as I mentioned, have been getting in touch regarding a particular hermeneutic that has been doing the rounds recently from Gregory Boyd, Greg Boyd, who is fairly well known for theologian.

I think you've been at conferences together and that sort of thing, Missio Alliance Conference. And his book, his big two volume book, "The Crucifixion of the Warrior God," which again we've discussed on my other podcast, *Unbelievable* with him. And again, we can't really, in the 10 minutes we've got left, do justice to the fullness, obviously, of his argument.

But let me at least give you the questions that have come in on this and it'll give a sweep of some of the way people are at least understanding what he is saying there. Pamela in the US says, "Greg Boyd suggests, as best I can read him in his recent book, that the difficult things said by God in the Old Testament are examples of God taking on a mask to relate better to the culture of the time or allowing the people to assign things like genocide to him, even though God wouldn't really do that. His rationale seems to be that the death and resurrection of Christ show God isn't like those difficult aspects of the Old Testament.

Marty in Saskatchewan, I think that's how you pronounce it. Saskatchewan, that's the one in Canada. Greg Boyd has recently released his two volume book, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*.

In these volumes, he attempts to reconcile violent passages such as God's command to Joshua to wipe out the Canaanites. He does this through what he calls literary crucifixes in that just as Jesus allowed himself to be seen as a criminal in the eyes of many while on the cross, God in his grace only appeared to show himself as violent and retributive before the nations through Israel, where in reality Israel acted on its own behalf violently and merely attributed these commands/actions to God. It seems to me in light of our post-modern western sensibilities that in desire to protect God from any word or action that may offend, we like Boyd our re-envisioning scripture to meet these concerns.

My question to you is, do you see validity in his thesis and is the attempt more harmful than good? Let's go for one more from here, Ron in Sioux Falls who says, "How do you explain the different pictures of God we find in scriptures?" In Greg Boyd's *Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, can somewhat understand this as a matter of perception, seeing what they expected to see in the Old Testament authors, but I don't find it totally satisfying,

says Ron. I don't know if you sort of personally have an idea of where Greg is coming from. Yes, I do.

Greg and I were at a conference, as you said, a couple of years ago, which was fascinating and he gave a rather long lecture. I had the same reaction as I did when you were reading those quotes just now that to begin with, I was thinking, "Yeah, I think maybe this will fly. Maybe this will actually work." I have to say, the more I listened to Greg and he's a delightful guy and we hung out together and talked at length, the more I thought, "I don't think that's quite right, but it's hard to put your finger on it partly because we're dealing with such huge issues of many, many texts and themes and so on." I do think that comment that you just read is important that we have to beware of apparently rushing to God's defense.

No, no, no, God wouldn't do that. Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out that the primal sin in Genesis is people putting the knowledge of good and evil before the knowledge of God. That doesn't mean that God lives in a moral vacuum and that there is a total disconnect between God's view of good and evil and our view of good and evil.

But I'd rather implies, as Paul says in Romans 9, who are you a human being to answer back to God? We always do have to be aware of that. Having said that, I think Greg is right to put his finger on something not least because in his culture, more than in my culture, there are people who seem to imply that, "Oh, well, God does redemptive violence, so then that's how you solve the problems of the world. You go and drop bombs on Iraq or whatever it is." And I think he's very much reacting in the present American political climate, which again, many people in Britain simply aren't terribly aware of how all that works out in America.

I've said a long time in America and I sometimes shudder at it. And so he's trying to say, "No, we've got to distance ourselves from there." I would want to comment it a little differently because there is a major difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. And that is part of God's story with the world.

And you have to understand the whole story, which, like a Shakespeare play, has these different acts. And you don't repeat speeches from Acts 2 and 3, say, if you're in Acts 4 or 5, whereas a different point in the drama now, that doesn't mean that it was bad. What happened there? It means something has happened which has changed the situation.

And obviously, if you believe anything like the Christian gospel, the thing that's happened is Jesus. So yes, there is a change. There is a shift.

And the slaughter of the Canaanites or whatever can never be a model, although many Christians have said, "Yeah, okay, that's what we have to do." The thing which is terrifying when you think about it. I recall at the end of Genesis 15, when God is making

the covenant with Abraham, the basic covenant, he says that your descendants will be slaves in a land not theirs, and I will rescue them, and they will come out and I'll take them home to their own land in the fourth generation. Then he says, "Because the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full, which is a very interesting idea." And it goes with other Old Testament passages, particularly, but also new, in which it seems that God's moral providence allows human beings to go from bad to worse, from bad to worse.

And I'm not an expert on ancient Canaanite practices, but such little as I have read of that indicates that there were some things which were taken as routine, whether it was child sacrifice or whatever, which we today would find completely stomach churning, not that we don't have some stomach churning things in our own world as well. But in that context, you can understand an ancient Israelite author saying the only word that God can say to this is total destruction, putting it all under a ban. Now, we shudder at that, but so I'm saying, I think Greg is raising important questions, I understand why they're coming particularly sharply within the American context.

I wouldn't myself want to go all that route. I tell the story slightly differently. One perspective on this, I come across, and I think it's sort of in the general area of the way Greg approaches this is.

I mean, Greg speaks of the idea of God accommodating to people's understandings of where they are in their culture. Which, of course, is what Calvin says about the Bible in general. Calvin says, "God lisps in our language," you know, that the words of Scripture are human words which can't begin to express the majesty and glory of God.

But God graciously inspires these words in order to talk about that. Russell and Costa Mesa, as part of a longer question, asks, could it be that Scripture is still important and inspired? But we read it more as a journey of a people's progressive understanding of God. In that sense, I mean, so many... So the word progressive has had a long and checkered history, and particularly in the 19th century, people reached for that idea of a progressive revelation which then got hooked into various philosophical schemes that, well, at the beginning, they didn't get very much of it.

And then with Moses, he got a bit more, and then with David, he got a bit more. Actually, I didn't see that at all. I see Abraham at his best, got as much of it as any of them.

David, as his worst, was worse than the rest of them. So I don't see a progressive revelation. Though I do see some cumulative things on both sides of the ledger.

You have to read Psalm 105 and 106 together. 105 says, God brought us out of Egypt. He gave us the law, and we're his people, and hurrah, let's go.

Psalm 106 says, and we got it wrong. And then he forgave us, and then we blew it again. And so he punished us.

And then we said, sorry. And then we... You know, you need both of those stories. And if there is progress, it's different with hundreds.

I think the way often people think of it, if Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the perfect representation of God, this is God truly revered. True stamp of God's image. The idea that it's through that image, God gives us of himself that we then read, and understand that all of those other images that may be more difficult.

This is why Richard Hayes's short book on the Old Testament to the Gospels is called Reading Backwards. And the idea that, here is Jesus, this is where it was all going, and now, like the two on the road to Emmaus, we look back as, of course, these things are all... And that includes all the times when they're getting it wrong, because all the times when they're getting it wrong, end up with the disciples running away, Judas portraying Jesus, Peter denying him, those are the quintessential story of that side of the Old Testament, just like Mary and John at the foot of the cross, are the quintessential, the good side of the Old Testament, you like, but you need both because both contribute to the meaning of the cross, where God takes the positive and fulfills it and takes the negative and finally deals with it. Sure, Greg, we'd love to have a chat of his own with you at some point, and maybe that could happen, who knows.

And in any case, thank you so much for tackling all of those in a short space of time, Tom. Just a quick one to finish off with, this is, I think it's pronounced "Zombol" in Hungary. Do you know any good Old Testament commentary suggestions that you yourself like and would recommend for somebody starting in ministry? And he says, "I'm particularly looking for commentaries that are like yours, but written on the Old Testament." Well, the ones that are explicitly like mine written on the Old Testament are by my friend and colleague John Goldengate, who's done the full Old Testament.

People sometimes ask me, "Are you going to do the Old Testament?" And I say, "Absolutely not." Mine was a huge journey. How John did that, I simply don't know, but he's done the whole Old Testament. And it should be mentioned, we've got the sitting here with us, the Bible for everyone published by SPCA, which is John's Old Testament and mine you.

Exactly. And he's done a whole series of commentaries himself of the Old Testament, Genesis for everyone. And they are great.

I would also say, even though I often disagree with him, Walter Brigeman remains a great guide and always stimulating and provocative and always with the needs of the pastor and preaching church at his heart. Absolutely. Well, there you go.

A few suggestions to get you started, Zombor. For the moment, Tom, thank you very much. Thank you.

Delving into the Old Testament. Looking forward to what we may have in coming weeks, but for the moment, thank you for listening. And don't forget to rate and review the podcast, share it with others, and of course, get signed up to the mailing list where you can find it more about all the special extra bonus content as well.

That's available from AskNTRight.com. And we'll see you again next time. Thank you for being with us today. More from Tom next week.

It's your last chance to register as well for our upcoming live show, Sexuality Gender and Identity. That's on Tuesday the 7th of February. I'll be joined by Andrew Bundt and Charlie Bell.

If you want to be part of that live online show from Premier Unbelievable, do go to unbelievable.live to register. It'll be a really interesting evening. You can ask your question again.

Unbelievable.live. And for all your other needs, go to our main website, premierunbelievable.com. The links are of course, are all with today's show. For now, much love. God bless.

See you next time.

(buzzing)