Jewish and pacifist: Jesus and the Old Testament

by J. Denny Weaver in the November 27, 2013 issue

Wenceslaus Hollar, Abraham and Lot separating, unknown date.

The notion that God does not hesitate to use violence or destruction to punish evil and exact vengeance is widely held and often reinforced by the popular media. The Left Behind books and movies featured divinely caused mayhem. The History Channel's series *The Bible* put divine violence on graphic display.

Such depictions raise questions for people both inside and outside the church. Beyond the obvious question of whether we can really love and worship a God of violence, a problem of ethics arises. It is a very short step from depicting violence as God's way of responding to problems to seeing human violence as a way of helping God. I want to challenge both this view of God and this application.

Christians have long professed to believe that God is in Christ and that God is revealed in the story of Jesus Christ. It is also generally accepted that the narrative of Jesus shows that he refused to use violence in responding to his adversaries. Putting these two affirmations together leads us to describe God as one whose actions are consistent with the merciful and nonviolent Jesus.

Over the centuries, many Christians have found ways to reject that equation. In the past few years, however, a small but growing number of voices have been arguing that we should in fact understand God in terms of the nonviolence revealed in the

story of Jesus.

One of the most prevalent arguments against the idea of a nonviolent God is the multitude of stories and images of divine violence and divinely sanctioned violence in the Old Testament. Think of the flood, by which an angry God is pictured as killing all the people on earth—as well as a lot of animals—except for Noah and his family and the animals he collected on the ark. Or recall the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, which featured the miracle at the Red Sea in which God drowned all of Pharaoh's army.

Israel's conquest of Palestine is pictured as a bloody affair. A favorite activity for Sunday school classes is depicting Joshua's army marching around the city of Jericho and its walls tumbling down. Not usually taught or acted out is the next part of the story. Except for the prostitute Rahab and her family, every living being in the city—men, women, children, oxen, sheep, donkeys—were "devoted to destruction" (Josh. 6:21), massacred by the Israelite army.

Jump to the story of King Saul. Saul was commanded by God to utterly destroy Amalek—"Kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:3)—and when he spared King Agag and the best of the livestock, this disobedience so angered God that Saul's kingship was withdrawn.

But such violence perpetrated and vouchsafed by God is by no means all of the story. The stories of the patriarchs include, for instance, cases in which conflicts are resolved nonviolently. One example involves Abram and his nephew Lot. Their flocks, herds and tents were so numerous that the land could not support both of them, and their herders quarreled. Abram suggested that they separate their operations, and he gave Lot the choice of land. Lot chose to move east into the plain of the Jordan and Abram moved west into Palestine (Gen. 13).

Isaac is the actor in another instance of nonviolent conflict resolution. Isaac's prosperity evoked jealousy on the part of neighboring Philistines. They stopped up Isaac's wells, and their herders quarreled with Isaac's shepherds. Rather than engaging in strife, three times Isaac moved on and dug new wells, thereby demonstrating that there was room for all to reside in peace (Gen. 26:12–22). It seems that since God had promised the land, there was no need to fight for it.

For an example from the time of the kings, consider Elisha's handling of an invasion ordered by the king of Aram in 2 Kings 6. As the story goes, with God's help the

prophet Elisha several times warned the king of Israel of places to avoid in order to escape ambushes by the military of the king of Aram. Frustrated, the king sent a large armed force to capture Elisha. But the eyes of this force were blinded so that they did not recognize Elisha. Elisha told them that though the person they sought was elsewhere, he would lead them to him. Then Elisha led them into Samaria, where they were surrounded by the forces of the king of Israel.

The Israelite king wanted to massacre the Aramean force, but Elisha told him instead to prepare food and drink for the Arameans. After they had feasted, the Israelite king sent them back to their own king. The story concludes, “And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel” (2 Kings 6:23). This victory, which occurred with both divine backing of Elisha and use of a ruse, was followed by kindness to the invaders—a nonviolent resolution to the story.

The book of Daniel contains stories of the Hebrews in exile in Babylon. Jeremiah 29 quotes a letter that Jeremiah sent to these exiles. He told them to stop pining for Palestine and to recognize that they were in Babylonia for the long haul. His advice was to get married and raise families, and then find wives and husbands for their children. They were to learn the language and engage in professions useful to Babylonian society. Jeremiah said, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). Most important, while living in ways that assist the Babylonians, they are to maintain their identity and witness as the people of God.

The stories of Daniel and his three friends align with Jeremiah’s injunction. The young men served in King Nebuchadnezzar’s court in Babylon, learning skills that would result in their assuming high office in the king’s administration. But they maintained their identity among God’s people—requesting to eat their own food rather than the rich food provided by the king and refusing to worship the huge golden statue that the king had set up. As a result they were thrown into the fiery furnace. God saved them, and their witness to the God of the Hebrews was recognized. Daniel continued to pray publicly to his God, and as a result he was cast into the lion’s den. Again God protected Daniel, and his witness to the God of Israel was recognized. These are stories of nonviolent cultural resistance.

These accounts of a nonviolent God or divinely blessed nonviolent practices need to be considered alongside the accounts of a violent God and violent practices. When these vignettes, representing many more such stories, are viewed together, it be-

comes apparent that the Old Testament does not present a uniform picture of God. The Old Testament depicts God in several ways, supporting both violent and nonviolent responses to problems. In fact, the text displays an ongoing conversation between conflicting views of the character of God and what it means to follow God. The Old Testament does not resolve that conversation.

In light of this conflicted view of God in the Old Testament, the story of Jesus becomes exceedingly important. As a Jew, Jesus carried forward the story of God's people Israel. Christians confess Jesus as the Messiah who was to come out of that people.

So which side of the conversation about the character of God in the Old Testament—the violent or the nonviolent side—is carried forward and comes to fruition in Jesus? The answer is obvious. Recognizing that Jesus carries forward one side of the conversation about the character of God is not a picking and choosing or a cutting out of part of the Old Testament. On the contrary. Only with the entire unexpurgated story in view does one see that in fact there is an ongoing conversation.

But acknowledging the conversation brings to the fore how Jesus continued it. When we see the full story present in the Old Testament, it is clear that Jesus did not invent nonviolence; that is, nonviolence as the way of the reign of God did not begin with him. Rather, Jesus brought additional visibility to God's rejection of violence, and the resurrection gave yet additional validation to a rejection of violence by testifying to the life of Jesus as truly the life of God.

These lessons from the story of Jesus as a continuation of the Old Testament's conversation about God all point to recognizing that the nonviolent trajectory in the Old Testament best characterizes the nature of God and that in Jesus a God is revealed whom we should describe and worship with nonviolent, rather than violent, images.

This way of seeing the relationship of the life of Jesus to the Old Testament has a number of implications. First, it becomes apparent that the Bible is not a rule book that prescribes conduct or establishes images to imitate today, nor is it a book whose laws necessarily dictate dos and don'ts directly to us across more than two millennia. It is rather a historical record of how God's people came to understand themselves as God's people, and how they understood their God and how their God

worked in the world. And because their understanding of God was developing, it is natural that different views of God would appear.

We should expect to see instances in which people got things wrong, without thereby turning that recognition into a rejection of the truth of the Bible. We should get used to the idea that not all biblical writings speak with the same voice, which enables us to say that some ideas in scripture are wrong or misguided and can be abandoned. With changes occurring and different perspectives appearing, it should be obvious that contemporary interpreters are not obligated to, and in fact cannot, harmonize or synthesize all biblical statements on a particular question into one homogenous view—whether on God, the blessing of marriage to multiple wives (alongside a clear endorsement of monogamous marriage) or decisions for or against circumcision or slavery.

Our job is not to try to synthesize all these views but to determine the direction in which the biblical story is moving. Seeing that it is a story makes clear that we, the church today, are the current edition, the cutting edge, of that ongoing story. We are to keep the story moving in the direction that is on display when we look at the Bible as a whole. For Christians, the indispensable reference point for determining the direction in which the story is moving and changing is the story of Jesus. And that story points us in the direction of recognizing that the God revealed in Jesus is a nonviolent God.

Seeing Jesus as the culmination of the Old Testament story tells us something important about that portion of the Bible. It tells us that the Old Testament really is Christians' book. In fact, it is only with the diverse Old Testament narratives that we fully see the significance of Jesus and how he advanced the story of God's people Israel.

These observations about how Jesus advanced the story of Israel calls for making explicit what is implicit in this account. Recently writings by J. Kameron Carter (*Race: A Theological Account*) and Willie James Jennings (*The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*) point to the disastrous results that followed when Christian theology separated Jesus from his Jewishness. It is Jesus' Jewishness that located him in a particular history in a particular place and time.

Carter and Jennings argue that the separation of Jesus from his Jewishness is what led to the accommodation and eventual support of racism by traditional theology.

They argue that the separation began with the early church fathers and is visible in the customary christological definitions of Jesus as “one in being with the Father” and as “truly God and truly man.” With Jesus defined in terms that located him above history, European theologians could define him in generic, supposedly universal terms, but in ways that in fact reflected themselves. Without stating it specifically, Jesus became white, and European white identity became the norm.

When slaves from Africa were brought into the picture, the idea of “pure” blood developed, with European white as the norm of purity. Deviations from this norm, whether in color or in form of government, produced varying degrees of inferior status and gave the Europeans a sense of superiority over other ethnic groups. This was the attitude with which the Portuguese, the Spaniards and later the French and English colonized Africa, the Americas and Asia. Carter uses Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor to show that orthodox Christian theology could have avoided this disastrous path. Carter and Jennings issue a profound and heartfelt call to make the Jewishness of Jesus central for any theology that confronts racism.

I have argued that Jesus’ rejection of violence was a continuation of a strand visible in Israel at least since the time of Jeremiah. Thus to the agenda of Carter and Jennings I would add that Jewish Jesus was—to use a modern term—a pacifist and that his rejection of violence should be intrinsic to theology about Jesus and included in the character of the God revealed in him.

The profession that Jesus continues the story of Israel and the call to make his Jewishness visible in our theology also calls for clarifying the relationship of Christians to Jews. Both Daniel Boyarin in *Border Lines* and John Howard Yoder in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* have argued that for several centuries people who recognized Jesus as the Messiah and those who did not worshiped together in church or synagogue. In other words, disagreements on whether Jesus was the Messiah did not get one expelled from the community as a heretic. A division into mutually exclusive camps came later—but there has never been a historical consensus on the time or event at which the schism became inevitable or final.

Both Yoder and Boyarin locate the beginning of the schism with Justin’s attempt in the second century to define the Logos as an exclusively Christian possession, even though many or most Jews believed in the Logos. Yoder and Boyarin agree that the schism involved the elimination of what Boyarin called “hybrids” and Yoder the “middle parties”—namely, the groups that had some affinity with the two sides

through different views of incarnation and Logos.

Yoder identifies a possible end point of the schism in the fourth century when Christians gained political power and could change the social meaning of their group. Boyarin locates the end point of the schism a bit later, with the promulgation of the code of Theodosius in 438, which defined Christianity as the pure religion and Judaism as false.

In spite of his high claims about Jesus—claims not shared by Boyarin—Yoder also contends that faith in the Jewish pacifist Jesus was not something that put him outside the people of Israel. Likewise, neither does Boyarin's rejection of these high claims about Jesus place him outside the people of Israel. The point of the historical analysis by both writers is that the conversation between Jews and Christians could and would change if the focus shifted away from debate about the specifics of the incarnation—which began with Justin—and toward the question of whether Jesus was the Messiah. The absence of a historical consensus on the finality of the schism indicates that Christians and Jews could even now still be engaged in an in-house debate about whether Jesus is the Messiah.

In light of these historical observations, and without surrendering his high Christology, Yoder suggests that the schism "did not have to be." Boyarin recognizes the logic and the attractiveness of that position but resists it because accepting it would mean at least a partial rejection of his own distinct tradition. Yoder's "it did not have to be" may be viewed by people in the Jewish tradition as one more effort by the majority Christian tradition to tell Jews who they are. Rather than seeking to undo the schism, which would imply that his Jewish tradition is unnecessary, Boyarin suggests that we "live it differently."

Seeing Jesus as a continuation of the narrative of Israel makes the Old Testament a Christian's book and identifies Christians as a continuation of the people of God whose father is Abraham. But there can be no question of a replacement of Israel by the church, no question of supersessionism, no question whether God has abandoned the Jews or whether the promises to Abraham have been shifted uniquely to Christians. Historically, the belief that the age of the Messiah had begun with Jesus was a new stream within Judaism. But those who did not and do not accept Jesus as Messiah are equally part of the stream of God's people whose father is Abraham.

Some Christians might thus imply that accepting Jesus as Messiah is an “advance” or a “going beyond.” But regardless of the language used, it may not be construed as a declaration that denies God’s promise in the other stream. Rather, the relationship of these two streams calls forth continuing conversation and cooperation. It is a going forward that respects differences without a perceived need to convert the other side. In Yoder’s sense, it is an undoing of the schism that did not have to be. For Boyarin it is a preserving of traditions. It may well be that the most fruitful conversation can occur when identities are respectfully maintained rather than glossed over. And the fruitful and freeing dimension of the conversation is that disagreement and maintaining of identity can proceed without a sense of mutual exclusion from the people of God as we discuss together what it means to live as God’s people.

I have ranged far from the initial question about the nonviolence of God, which indicates the wide-ranging theological and ethical impact of locating Christian identity with the narrative of Jesus rather than with one or another of the classic creeds and confessions of Christendom’s various denominations. This reformation in Christian thought is just beginning.