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**Can the Angry God of the Old Testament be
the Foundation of Assurance and Faith?**

Prof. Dr. H. G. L. Peels
Professor of Old Testament
Theologische Universiteit Apeldoorn, Netherlands¹

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Introduction

Violence in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, is a stumbling block to many. That was indeed the case already early in church history, and is even more so today. The Old Testament is the foundational document of both Israel and the Christian Church: the Word of God for all ages. From this book a believer draws comfort and strength; from this book the church derives directives for faith and life. You would therefore expect to find in it words of love, light

¹ See www.TUA.nl and www.webkey7.nl/tua/images2/curriculum_vitae_prof_dr_hgl_peels.pdf for his full vita. Prior to his current post, he was President of the Old Testament Society in the Netherlands and Belgium, Rector of the Theological Univ. of Apeldoorn, Co-founder and President of the Christian Academic Network of the Netherlands, Research Assoc. Dept. of Old Testament Studies at Univ. of Free State in South Africa, Member Board of Directors Greenwich School of Theology in UK, and more.

and life – but not the language of violence. Nevertheless, just a few pages after that beautiful beginning (Genesis 1: the creation), it does come to revolution, manslaughter, vengeance and a destructive flood... and so this continues right to the end of the Bible. Someone once did the math and these figures are now floating around everywhere: the Old Testament contains 600 passages about murder, 100 texts in which God gives the command to kill, and 1000 passages that speak of God’s wrath, punishment and warfare. Blood flows plentifully in the Bible. From the blood of Abel that cries to the heavens in the first Bible book (Genesis), up to the call upon God to avenge spilt blood in the last Bible book (Revelation).

Many Bible readers are shocked by this point. Shouldn’t the Bible be a sort of safe haven in this world in which we live, filled as it is with violence and misery? Shouldn’t the Bible be a book that points to a different world, the world of *shalom* (peace), instead of the world of *hamas* (the Hebrew word for “violence”)?

The Oxford Dictionary presents us with the following definition of the word “violence”: “*behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something*”. It is clearly a negative concept. In our perception, violence and abuse of power lie along the same track. In the past century we have seen so many examples that we have become sick to death of it: Verdun 1916, Hiroshima 1945, Rwanda 1994, New York 2001. Violence is, as it were, incorporated into our human society. Violent conflicts form a permanent factor that has to be reckoned with, on a personal level, socially, and worldwide. Is there a daily newspaper anywhere in which the word “violence” cannot be found? Yet it is important to make a distinction between one sort of violence and the other. There is violence that is evil through and through, that seeks only its own interest and despises the other, but there is also counter- violence that has the intention of resisting evil, sticking up for the other, and restoring justice. The violence of the Norwegian extremist Breivik against his young victims was of a very different character to the physical violence used by the police at his arrest. Of course, in the havoc of human existence things often get terribly intertwined. Yet in practice we cannot get around this fact: there is evil violence and there is liberating violence. Violence that serves the world of *hamas*, and violence that serves the world of *shalom*.

When we also come across that whole spectrum of violence in the Bible, should we, in a certain sense, not be *glad* that this is the case? Whom would it serve to have a Bible filled with wisdom and devout reflections that stand removed from our daily reality? Life is multi-coloured, raw, and sometimes bewildering. In this life, natural violence, and social, military, religious and political violence all play a great role. The Old Testament addresses this everyday reality, the texts focussing on a God who goes his own way with his people, in this real world, with a deep passion for justice and peace. A God therefore who, in extreme cases, also can use violence. Wrongdoing is not taken lightly; people are held responsible; the dimension of violence is not concealed. What a joy it is for all those who have been marginalized and trampled on in our world history that the God of the Bible also – yes, especially so – concerns himself with violence. That means, in other words, that the bully will not have the advantage over his victim forever.

I. The Basic Pattern

In the meantime, it is important that we see the violence theme in the Old Testament in the right proportions. Though it is clear that violence is fully present in the Old Testament, the actual question is how, and in what context, this violence emerges. Sometimes the Old Testament, after some selective treatment of the “awkward texts”, gets quickly set aside as a problematic and primitive book. However, when reading the Old Testament in all fairness, one cannot miss the ground rule of justice and peace. God has created the world as good, and He did not let go of that world after sin had driven a schism through all creation. Against all the evils of greed and decay He is working towards a world of *shalom*: in the Old Testament via his people Israel, and in the New Testament via his Son Jesus Christ. In this way He (speaking in New Testament terms) “makes his Kingdom come”. His first utterance to go out over this creation was “let there be light”, and that will also be his last word. In between both these words, He shows us the way, and leads us out of the dark towards the light, because of his incomparable love for man. However, in order to come to a world of *shalom*, God sometimes, in this broken world of *hamas*, has to make use of violence: counter-violence to curb the evil, to punish and to cast it out. Indeed, counter-violence is and remains a form of

violence, but it is necessary because evil usually cannot be stopped by words, however alluring or angry those words may sound.

The Old Testament makes it clear that this kind of violence is only safe with God. Violence in the hands of people very quickly gets out of hand. Surprisingly enough, the Old Testament itself, despite its reputation as a book of violence, brings a far-reaching message of anti-violence. This is especially noticeable when we make a comparison between religious literature from the ancient world around Israel. In Assyrian royal inscriptions or Ugarit mythology, forceful power is sometimes raised to a level of the highest virtue. In the Old Testament, however, violence is never glorified. On the contrary: human violence is unmasked as a great evil at the very beginning, in the history of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4). In order to curb the spread of this evil, God gives the brother-murderer a sign: God himself will act as judge over whoever injures Cain. In this story, which could be seen as a window on world history, God's counter-violence is mentioned for the first time. Jesus' statement that "*all who draw the sword will die by the sword*" (Matt. 26:52) resonates on a broad soundboard in the Old Testament literature of wisdom. Everywhere this wisdom warns against the folly of violence and the lust for power. In Old Testament law, clear boundaries are set around the violence of retribution, for example, in the well known "*an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*". In ancient societies, in which revenge was without limitations, this rule came as a blessing from heaven: just *one* eye for an eye and only *one* tooth for a tooth. Compare this to the words of Lamech in Gen. 4, who brags that he will revenge himself 77 times for every injustice done to him!

In the Old Testament, in all sorts of situations human violence is discouraged. It is striking how often the kings of Israel and Judah are severely criticised by the prophets for their use of violence. The prophet Nathan, for example, reprimanded David, the pre-eminent king and founder of the Judaic royal dynasty (2 Sam. 12). This David, chosen by God, was not permitted to build a house for God because he was "a man of blood". Such criticism was unheard-of in the world of the Ancient Near East. There the founder of the dynasty was by definition always the founder of the temple.

The longing for a world of *shalom* gains ground especially in the eschatological prophecy. The Old Testament does not preach a call to

conquer the world by force, but on the contrary, that the law will go out from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem, and that the people will then come to find shelter under God's justice. *"They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore"* (Isa. 2). A stirring vision is that of the kingdom of peace in Isaiah 11, with images of predatory and tame animals grazing together, and of a child that plays at a snake's den. Psalm 46 sings of what God is doing on earth: *"He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. He says, "Be still, and know that I am God!""*

II. Our Perception of God

The fact that the Old Testament contains a clear anti-violence message does not solve the problem of violence in this book, but puts an even greater strain on it. For how does this message relate to various passages in which, to our sensibilities, excessive divine violence is exerted, or in which people are called upon to destroy others? Examples are plentiful: the Great Flood over the whole earth, the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah, the wiping out of the people of Canaan and Amalek, frightening prophecies of judgment, terrible imprecations. But if God is a God of love, how can this be?! Is this not in contradiction with the biblical ground rule that we sketched previously? For many Bible readers these questions simply multiply. Whoever looks for answers to these questions should do so in all humility. For these are not the sort of questions that can be met with clear solutions and sound arguing. The demonic reality of evil is too great for that, and the God of the Bible is not to be fathomed. Of crucial importance here is that we are prepared to test our own perception of God critically against the biblical image of God.

It cannot be denied that, in the past century, far-reaching changes have taken place in modern thinking about God, especially in the West. This has been referred to as a metamorphosis in the perception of God. Clearly an end has come to unproblematic talk of God's vengeance, God's judgment, and God's wrath. The combination of God and violence evokes embarrassment and resistance in many people today. The perception of God has faded somewhat, became

milder, softer and lighter. The call to break with authoritarian perceptions of God from the past is heard everywhere: away with the depressing and slavish images of God as Lord, King, Judge, Warrior! The accent on God's compassion, love and grace must prevail. Some even speak of a "therapeutic" God image. That very well suits a culture that gives priority to the assertive human with his independent freedom of choice and self-realization. Collective thinking, such as is found in many cultures and also in the Bible, has become strange to us. The individual has become the norm and the starting point in our thinking. The accent lies on positive emotions and experiences, and a prosperity-ideal of abundant enjoyment and the exclusion of all disturbing factors. Faith must comply with man and his own experiences. In this context, what would you want with a God who ruffles your feathers, demands surrender, conversion and obedience – a God who sometimes even punishes and exterminates a complete nation in his wrath?

It goes without saying that we are all influenced by these developments, in the troubles we may have with the violence passages in the Old Testament. Former generations of Bible readers had far less problems with this issue, but we do have them: our reading glasses have changed. But let us ask some questions now. How does a Christian Tutsi whose family has been slaughtered by Hutus read the biblical testimony of God's oracles of judgment? How does a Cambodian who wears the scars of the Khmer Rouge era in his flesh read the imprecations of the Psalms? Or let us listen to the Yale University theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croatian who in the nineties was a witness to the violence in the Balkan wars. He writes:

One, then, could object that it is not worthy of God to wield the sword. Is God not love, long-suffering and all-powerful love? A counter question could go something like this: Is it not arrogant to presume that our contemporary sensibilities about what is compatible with God's love are so much healthier than those of the people of God throughout the whole history of Judaism and Christianity? ... One could further argue that in a world of violence it would not be worthy of God not to wield the sword; if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make the final end to violence, God would not be worthy of our worship.

Deeply anchored in the Old Testament is the confession of the compassionate God who is love, and who *therefore* can rise so ardently to anger (Ex. 34). Both sides of this basic confession – God's

holy love and Gods holy wrath – dominate history. The image of God pictured by the biblical testimonies takes us to the reality of life. Following through on the question of the purpose of the Old Testament violence texts, we come up against the unfathomably deep intensity of evil, injustice, arrogance, repression and lust for power. God, who loves justice and righteousness, does not remain unmoved when these are violated. He holds the man who commits injustice responsible for his deeds. In these passages we meet a zealous God who in his holy wrath unmasks and judges all evil. Inside Him is a deep aversion to all that is at odds with the goodness of his creation. A powerful longing for peace, justice, and destruction of the darkness speaks from this. There has truly been a battle fought since the breach at the beginning of humanity, when God spoke to the serpent in paradise: *“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”* (Gen. 3).

The violence passages in the Old Testament open our eyes to who the God of love *also* is, and who we are as humans. God is the completely Other One, who truly takes action both in word and deeds. Thanks be to God – for in the everyday reality of a world in which the devil and fate, hatred and death are constantly making their move, a God-with-clean-hands would be completely out of the game. The God of the Bible can do awesome things, horrible things to us humans. But never randomly and unpredictably. He does not practise violence for the sake of violence, as is the case in many a literary text about the gods in the Ancient Near East. In one way or another, his “violence” always has to do with his aversion to evil and sin. His intervention prevents the lie from triumphing. God’s violence stands in a broader frame: that of his justice. Time and again, his violence serves the restoration of justice and peace.

In this lies a mighty comfort for the numerous destitute and deceived in our world history. “My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you. When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness” (Isaiah 26). All the more do we understand how powerfully deep God’s love is, who gave all to save this world. Grace, reconciliation, justification, new life – all those great words in the Bible glow even brighter when

we see that God is a holy God, working his way right through our world of *hamas* to his world of shalom.

III. Genocide? Vengefulness?

Yet it still troubles us when we stumble across passages in the Old Testament that, on first reading, are hard to digest: notorious passages most preachers carefully avoid in their Sunday sermons. Two of the most well-known are the command to exterminate the Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7, and the proclamation of hatred in Psalm 139. Now it is true that genocide is a crime against humanity, and inciting hate is forbidden in any democratic country. What is to be done with a Bible in which these things are documented? What we should do with the Bible is, foremost: read carefully, listen patiently, judge fairly.

The command to kill the seven Canaanite nations is horrifying indeed. “To put the *cherem* on them”, is what Deuteronomy 7 calls this: to utterly destroy them. This reminds us of the Muslim fanatics’ *jihad*. But is it really that? It is noticeable that God’s command in Deuteronomy 7 is unique: only there and only then was Israel commanded to do this. Only to these particular seven nations, and not to arch enemies like Edom or Philistia. And only in that specific period in history and never again. When you read this text in its broader context, you notice that this command of extermination is connected with two issues: firstly with God’s deep disgust of Canaan’s godlessness, and secondly with God’s exclusive love for Israel.

The Canaanite nations have a special position in the Old Testament. As early as Genesis 9, in the story of Noah’s drunkenness, we see that after Ham’s misbehaviour, it is not Ham himself but his son Canaan who is mentioned in the ensuing curse. In Genesis 15, God speaks to Abraham about Israel’s long stay in Egypt: only the fourth generation was to return to Canaan “*for the sin of the Amorites (a collective name for the Canaanites) has not yet reached its full measure*”. Also in many other passages, for example Leviticus 18 and 20, or Deuteronomy 9, 12 and 20 the gruesome injustice and idolatry of the Canaanite nations is brought to the fore. Apparently, these nations, notwithstanding the years of God’s patience following his promise to Abraham, had hit rock bottom in their immorality and

godlessness. God wished to protect his people against this. He loved his covenant people too much. Through this people Israel God determined to put into effect his purpose for the world: “*for you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession*” (Deut. 14:2). Nothing and no one was allowed to come between Him and Israel, especially not the evildoing Canaanites’ temptations. The land of Canaan was to be a dwelling place in which God and his people could live together in safety. Israel was not to be contaminated by the moral and religious filth of the original inhabitants.

This has nothing to do with ethnocentrism, but has everything to do with the holiness of God’s people. Were the Israelites to yield to temptation and themselves commit the same atrocities, then God would not spare them, but strike them with the same excommunication. This is exactly what took place in the course of Israel’s history. For Israel did not drive out most of the Canaanite nations, and subsequently succumbed to the charms of the “Canaanite” way of life, surrendering to idolatry and evil. This downhill slide process resulted in the exile, in Assyria and in Babylonia: the land “spat out” the people. Israel itself suffered the fate of the Canaanite nations, as had been the case with Sodom and Gomorrah beforehand, and even earlier with the great flood. God, as it were, partially brings forward in time the Final Judgment, in order to incidentally put an end to the evil, right then and there. Not that it pleases Him to do this: “*For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone*” (Lament. 2). But by this counter-violence He prevents evil from growing rampant unhindered.

Just as troubling to our ears as the command of extermination in Deuteronomy 7 are the imprecations and fierce words in Psalm 139: “*Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies*”. But what, actually, is the psalmist saying here? In his song, he had confessed that God sees all, and knows us completely. In accordance with this the poet now proclaims his dependence, saying that he belongs to God totally. To accentuate this last statement, he confesses – wholly in the language of the Old Testament – that he does not at all belong with the godless, and

“hates” them. This entails a total commitment to God and a heartfelt aversion to the world of evil, and of the “bloodthirsty”. These are not his personal enemies, but God’s enemies: observe the order in the text. It is a type of confession in a negative mode. However paradoxical it may appear, this hate is not in opposition to the biblical ethic of neighbourly love, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

In Psalm 139, someone is speaking who belongs to God’s covenant people. In Old Testament times, God’s way with this world is characterized by a unique concentration on this one people of Israel, among whom He wished to live. It was all cutting edge history here. God had made his covenant with Israel. In the world of those times, it was customary to confirm a covenant with a series of blessings and curses. So it is with the “treaty text” of God’s covenant with Israel, see for example Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy 28. With his word about “hate” against God’s enemies, the poet is linking with God’s own covenant curse upon the godless. God himself hates all who do injustice, and despises all who deceive and shed blood (Psalm 5), “...but the wicked, those who love violence, He hates with a passion” (Psalm 11). As God’s covenant people, Israel had the holy duty to hate evil, and cast off uncleanness and godlessness. Evil was not to gain a foothold in Israel (Psalm 140). By standing completely on God’s side, the poet of Psalm 139 makes a choice for the world of blessing and goodness, truth and justice. This poet does not take justice into his own hands, but with his prayer places everything in God’s hand. When reading such a proclamation we should also take into account that the Old Testament believer had barely any view of the life after death that we now have. Nor did he know of the day of a final judgment, at the end of world history in which God would ultimately vindicate the wronged. Therefore, with a imprecation he calls upon his God to intervene here and now and show his justice. For it is unimaginable to him that godlessness should have the last word in his reality...

<p>The aforementioned means that we cannot pray this sort of prayer today in the same manner that Israel did. But to condemn these Old Testament prayers would be short-sighted. For its kernel is the longing for justice and peace, and that remains essential up to today.</p>

IV. The Difference

From the beginning, the church has maintained that the Old Testament is God's Word. But this wasn't always taken for granted. Early in church history, a strong voice was heard to do away with the Old Testament. Especially by a bishop's son, Marcion, who in the second century after Christ in his book *Antithesis* made a huge contrast between the Old and New Testament, and between the God of the Old and the God of the New Testament. He contrasted violence and revenge in the Old Testament over against peace, reconciliation and love in the New Testament. With all sorts of variations, many followed his track right up to today, speaking of a contradiction between Old and New Testament, although seldom so radically as Marcion did. And yes, this does seem a logical conclusion, if you juxtapose an imprecation from the Psalms right next to Jesus' prayer on the cross. And you could claim to detect in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount some kind of reproach against all violence in the Old Testament ("love your enemies", Matt. 5). Some scholars speak of a two-track policy in the Old Testament: on the one side you have the language of violence, on the other the language of peace. The latter gains strength through the ages, and the New Testament follows that latter line.

Yet this interpretation fails to do justice to the testimonies of the Old and New Testaments. For nowhere do the New Testament authors criticize the Old Testament. They take it as their starting point, as the authoritative Word of God, as Jesus himself did. They readily quote from the imprecatory psalms. Jesus himself uses the language of violence in his parables and in his warnings against Hell. At one point He compares himself with a king who will have his enemies destroyed before his eyes (Luke 12). In the Book of Revelation the Lamb and the Lion are the same person. *God is a consuming fire*, as Hebrews 12 quotes from Deuteronomy 4. The thesis can easily be defended that the New Testament is even more serious about judgment and condemnation than the Old Testament. In the New Testament it becomes manifestly clear that God's wrath extends over the entire world. (John 3:36; Rom. 1:18). Moreover, in the New Testament God's judgment gains a greater depth because it can now be called "eternal" – up to and including the terrible prospect of Hell.

Between the Old and New Testament we see no principal *contradiction*, but we do see a clear *difference*. Undeniably, we read less about violence in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. And the New Testament preaches more emphatically reconciliation and love toward the enemy. Not because in the New Testament the image of God has changed, but because here the way of God has changed: his way with his people and this world get a very far-reaching change: in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Him, the world of *shalom* breaks through definitely; the Kingdom of God has begun. It breaks through the boundaries of Israel, and spreads out into the whole world. No longer is there the restrictive and unique concentration on Israel alone, but God reaches out to everybody with his gospel.

In Jesus' death and resurrection, God's righteousness and justice are demonstrated ultimately. In Jesus' death on the cross – which was extremely violent – He reconciles us humans to God. To save people, God himself brings the offering of his love. The great judgment on evil falls on Jesus; he bears God's condemnation in our stead. All who put their trust in Jesus are saved – but whoever rejects his Word awaits the Final Judgment on the Last Day. In the intervening period in which we now live, the time of God's patience (2 Pet. 3), the gospel is being spread worldwide. The gospel proclaimed by Jesus is not a counter-voice that partly disqualifies the Old Testament, but it gives voice to the new, decisive phase in the coming of God's Kingdom in this world.

Therefore, the church today does not wield the sword, but the weapon of prayer. No longer (as was the case with Israel in the Old Testament period) do the state and church come together in one nation, with the necessity to execute violence. Violence is not an instrument to realize the "salvation-state", the Kingdom that has come in Christ – to the contrary, the only weapons of the Church are spiritual, especially the sword of the Word. This does not set aside the fact that, according to the New Testament, as far as the "constitutional state" is concerned, God can make use of human violence to curb evil: the sword has been entrusted to the worldly government (Rom. 13 and 1 Pet. 2). Meanwhile the church, while praying for the government and committing everything into God's hands, awaits the day that God's world of *shalom* will break through for all eternity (Rev. 19).



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