

Assyria the Ax, God the Lumberjack: Jeremiah 29, the Logic of the Prophets, and the Quest for a Nonviolent God

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Introduction

The Anabaptist tradition has long linked Christian discipleship to a life of nonviolent obedience, insisting that the central significance of Jesus' death and resurrection confirms Jesus' life and teaching as the normative guide for Christian ethics.¹ Grounded in this conviction, several contemporary scholars have appealed to a "christocentric approach" to insist upon the nonviolence of God and reject the link between God and violence often present within biblical material. While I agree that a commitment to follow Jesus in life demands a thoroughgoing commitment to nonviolence, I disagree that the nonviolence of *God* provides the necessary grounds for Christian pacifism. Rather, for Jesus as for us, such a conviction emerges from interacting with scriptural documents and a firm conviction about the sovereignty of God.

Jeremiah 29 and its call to "seek the welfare of the city" has been identified as crucial for "Narrative Christus Victor" (J. Denny Weaver) and affirmed in an effort to properly understand God's nonviolent character (Eric Seibert). Upon closer inspection, however, Jeremiah's letter to the Babylonian exiles reflects the same logic and assumptions that undergird Isaiah, where God has the divine prerogative, ability, and willingness to use

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¹ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994), 1-20.

human empires as instruments to discipline Israel (and others) by violent means. To use Isaiah's imagery: while Assyria may be the ax used to punish Israel, God is the lumberjack who wields it (Isa. 10). Rather than transcend these characteristic prophetic assumptions, Jer. 29 also sees God as both driving Israel into exile and gathering it from the nations.

All is not lost, however. Luke's depiction of Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4) provides fertile ground for reconsidering a christocentric approach. Rather than providing a theological or ethical rationale for the nonviolence of God, this passage reflects a hermeneutical stance dedicated to interpreting biblical documents in search of the divine will. Placing Jesus at the center of christocentrism challenges those committed to such an approach to follow his example by forming and habitually participating in reading communities devoted to wrestling with biblical documents. Such an approach follows Jesus' lead in arriving at a nonviolent ethical stance through a fundamentally *hermeneutical* commitment—even to those documents that depict God violently—rather than adopting a nonviolent view of God as an epistemological center or criterion that sees any link between God and violence as mistaken.

Portraying such an approach as an effort to defend a violent God misses the point of shifting away from an innovative theological or ethical “construction” of God and towards a renewed commitment to prioritize a hermeneutical orientation and commitment to Scripture. To paraphrase John Howard Yoder, the case I seek to make does not deal primarily with the Old Testament or even a link between God and violence, but with contemporary scholars who assert that the only way to emerge with a nonviolent Christian ethic is to insist upon the nonviolence of God, and so leave large swaths of the biblical witness behind.² As with Jesus, a contemporary Christian commitment to peace emerges from and demands an ongoing hermeneutical struggle with the OT, the only Scripture Jesus and his disciples possessed. Indeed, appealing to Yoder and Jer. 29 to support a nonviolent view of God proves ironic, since neither conforms to such a view; rather, both emphasize

² Yoder introduces his influential work by saying: “The case I am seeking to make has to do not narrowly with the New Testament text but with the modern ethicists who have assumed that the only way to get from the gospel story to ethics ... was to leave the story behind.” Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 12-13.

the core prophetic conviction that God is sovereign over creation, history, and the nations. In contrast, the quest for a nonviolent God seeks to limit the divine to our ethical and epistemological expectations while discounting elements of the biblical witness that suggest otherwise. In so doing, scholars tend to replace what they deem to be ancient misconceptions with their own constructions of God, and so turn away from the basic hermeneutical orientation that Jesus (and Yoder) exemplify.

God, Empires, and “Disaster” in Isaiah

Before discussing Jer. 29 I will consider the portrayal of God in several key passages within Isaiah in order to describe the prophets’ logic with respect to God and violence. Indeed, given its extraordinary prominence in and influence on the New Testament, Isaiah looms large in any discussion of Christian hermeneutics.

The “Song of the vineyard” provides a thumbnail sketch of the message of I Isaiah,³ in which the initial metaphor provides a rhetorical ploy to prompt the people to convict themselves (Isa. 5:1-4). For our purposes, the conclusion is key:

And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;

I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste...

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,

and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;

he expected justice (*mishpat*), but saw bloodshed (*mispah*);

righteousness (*tsedaqah*), but heard a cry (*tse’aqah*)!

(Isa. 5:5-7)⁴

What began as a “love song” turns to condemnation and an announcement of judgment and destruction. The language could not be clearer—God will remove the protective hedge and the vineyard will be destroyed. And, in

³ While scholars commonly refer to I, II, and III Isaiah to differentiate between pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic layers within the book of Isaiah, the scroll defies such easy classification. Nonetheless, this paper employs these terms as heuristic shorthand, placing them in single quotes to indicate the provisional nature of such terminology.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

no uncertain terms, the LORD will be responsible to do all of these things; indeed, the description of God as the “LORD of hosts” or “LORD of armies” underscores the militant imagery here.⁵

The song of the vineyard leads to a series of “woe” oracles (5:8-23) that further indict the people and reiterate what the LORD will do:

Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people,
and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them . . .
*For all this his anger has not turned away,
and his hand is stretched out still.* (Isa. 5:25)

This verse also introduces a key phrase reflecting a significant motif in Isaiah that is reiterated verbatim four times in chapters 9-10: “For all this his anger has not turned away . . .” (9:12, 17, 21; 10:4). The conviction underlying the “song” is thus repeated: the people’s actions have provoked the wrath of the LORD, who will act in judgment.

Whereas Isa. 5 depicts the LORD’s ability to summon foreign kings and nations as an owner whistles for his dog (5:26-30), Isa. 10 specifies how God will destroy the “vineyard”:

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger
— the club in their hands is my fury!
Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I command him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the streets . . .
(Isa. 10:5-6)

What lay implicit in chapter 5 becomes explicit here: the LORD will use Assyria as an instrument of divine judgment. While the foreign king does so unwittingly, believing his own might and wisdom result in victory (10:12-14), the reader knows better. The audacity of Assyria’s claim here is mocked

⁵ For an overview of the origin and ongoing royal and military connotations of the designation “LORD of hosts,” see C.L. Seow, “Hosts, Lord Of,” in *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 304-307.

with rhetorical flourish:

Shall the ax vaunt itself over the one who wields it,
 or the saw magnify itself against the one who handles it?
 As if a rod should raise the one who lifts it up,
 or as if a staff should lift the one who is not wood! (Isa. 10:15)

The ludicrous analogies further underscore the point. Israel is not destroyed because of having a weak military or making a strategic mistake in the world of *realpolitik*, but because the LORD wills it and uses this foreign empire—and its ruthless military might—to do so. While Assyria may be the ax, God is the lumberjack.⁶

The perspective of ‘I Isaiah’ seems clear. Israel has violated the LORD’s expectations, and God will use a foreign nation instrumentally to bring judgment on this rebellious people. Despite the discomfort they may provoke, the “anger of the LORD” figures prominently and the designation “LORD of armies” underscores the militaristic implications of this understanding. As Walter Brueggemann observes, “The tradition of Isaiah articulates faith on a large scale, resisting any safe, private, or conventional categories.”⁷ Here God is free, active, and in control, even of foreign powers and their military hardware; God is no pacifist in ‘I Isaiah.’

In ‘II Isaiah’ (Isa. 40-55) there seems to be a significant shift. Where earlier chapters speak a message of judgment and impending doom, Isa. 40ff proclaims a message of “comfort,” where scattering has been reversed to in-gathering. Many key passages emerge in this context that are later picked up, including the “voice crying in the wilderness” and the “suffering servant” songs that NT writers link directly to the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Given this substantial shift, we might expect a radical reorientation of the portrayal of God—a divine lobotomy to rid the LORD of the anger and redemptive violence so prominent earlier in the book. However, the understanding of God here reflects the same prophetic logic and assumptions as before.

⁶ For Isaiah’s use of imagery here, see Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 91-94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

While the proclamation of comfort and the suffering servant in ‘II Isaiah’ tend to garner more attention, Isa. 45 proves key in describing how, why, and to what end God will bring this message of comfort and in-gathering to fruition. The chapter opens with the remarkable statement:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed (*meshiho*), to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes... (Isa. 45:1)

This passage identifies Cyrus, the king of Persia, as the instrument God will use to gather “my servant Jacob” back from exile. What’s more, while the verb “anoint” appears elsewhere, this is the only occurrence of the term *mashiach* (messiah/anointed one) in the entire book. Where ‘I Isaiah’ identified Assyria as God’s instrument for executing judgment, here Cyrus of Persia appears as God’s “anointed” to send them home.

In addition, this passage strongly emphasizes the singularity of God:

I am the LORD, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god (or are no gods).
I (continue to) gird⁸ you, though you do not know me,
so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west,
that there is no one besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other (Isa. 45:5-6).

In contrast to the ten commandments, where “you shall have no other gods *before me*” (Ex. 20:3) allows for the possibility of other deities, ‘II Isaiah’ proves more emphatic: there simply are no other gods.⁹ Finally, while English translations often obscure the stridency of vv. 6-7, the wording could hardly be more forceful:

⁸ With no mention of weaponry or armaments, I have modified the NRSV rendering of the term *azar* from “arm” to “gird,” following the KJV, RSV, and NAS.

⁹ “I am the LORD and there is no other” appears four times in Isa. 45 (vv. 5, 6, 18, 21) and nowhere else in the OT. The phrase “*there is no other*” (*en ’od*) itself proves unusual, appearing seven times in Isaiah (all within chapters 45-46) to underscore that there is none besides God (45:5, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22; 46:9). Similar uses outside of Isaiah are scattered (cf. Deut. 4:35, 39; 1 Kings 8:60; and Joel 2:27).

I (am) the LORD, and there is no other:
 former of light and creator of darkness
 maker of *shalom* (peace/prosperity/well-being) and creator of *ra'* (evil/
 disaster).
 I the LORD do/make all of these . . . (Isa. 45:6b-7).¹⁰

The prominent use of the term “create” in ‘II Isaiah’ further underscores God’s sovereignty by depicting the LORD as the creator of the ends of the earth (40:28), the heavens (42:5), Israel (43:1), and both darkness and “evil/disaster” (*ra'*) (45:7).¹¹ In effect, the same God who created the world sent Israel into exile and will return it to the land, so that dismantling the connection between God and exile throws the former into question as well.

Finally, like the depiction of Assyria in chapter 10, Isaiah 45 also employs a metaphor for rhetorical effect to describe God’s sovereignty over foreign powers:

Woe to you who strive with your Maker,
 earthen vessels with the potter!
 Does the clay say to the one who fashions it,
 “What are you making”? or “Your work has no handles”?
 Woe to anyone who says to a father, “What are you begetting?”
 or to a woman, “With what are you in labor?” (Isa. 45:9-10)

While the ax of Assyria has given way to the clay vessels of Persia and God the lumberjack becomes the LORD the potter, the point remains the same: God is in control and can use earthly powers at will.¹²

This brief discussion of Isa. 45 demonstrates that the logic of ‘II Isaiah’ proves consistent with that of ‘I Isaiah.’ In both cases God’s will is carried out through the instrumental use of foreign powers (including their use of violence) and can be done without their knowledge or recognition. Where

¹⁰ My translation; the participle form here can be translated as either “I form . . .” or “former of.”

¹¹ “Create” appears even more prominently in Isaiah than Genesis (21 and 11 times respectively, out of 54 occurrences in the OT). Within Isaiah, “create” is a particularly key term in ‘II Isaiah’ with only one occurrence before chapter 40, 3 in 56-66, and the remaining 17 in Isa. 40-55.

¹² Paul employs the same image to insist upon the prerogative of the potter related to wrath and destruction, explicitly drawing on the broader Isaiah scroll; see Rom. 9:19-29.

Weaver seeks to “put the devil back into the equation” to distance God from violence,¹³ Isaiah moves in the opposite direction, claiming that God was, is, and will be in control. In fact, using Weaver’s definition of “the devil or Satan” as “the name for the locus of all power that does not recognize the rule of God,” then within Isaiah God uses “Satan” in the guise of the kings of Assyria and Persia to carry out the divine will, even calling the latter God’s “anointed/messiah.”¹⁴ According to the book of Isaiah’s perspective it would be an idolatrous mistake to suggest that someone or something else prompted the destruction of Jerusalem and Babylonian exile, or the subsequent ingathering of Israel from the nations.

The conviction that God ultimately controls world events, including the rise and fall of brutal empires, reflects a basic understanding of God reflected in *all* of Isaiah—the hopeful message of comfort and gathering in ‘II Isaiah’ as much as that of judgment and punishment in ‘I Isaiah.’ While we may be tempted to sideline such judgment and emphasize the NT’s preference for ‘II Isaiah’ where God proclaims return to those in captivity, the entire book shares the same logic with respect to its understanding of God.¹⁵ And while we may wish to find (or “construct”) a nonviolent God, Isaiah confidently asserts that the LORD is in control of both the disaster of exile and the comfort of return; indeed, to reject this premise makes the book of Isaiah largely unintelligible.

Ironically, attempts to insulate God from the violence of exile by saying that Isaiah and the other prophets were mistaken (Seibert)¹⁶ or by attributing

¹³ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 213-15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 211. While this perspective sounds odd, it proves similar to the role of “the *satan* (adversary)” in Job, who functions as a prosecuting attorney within God’s heavenly court (Job 1-2). Though a larger discussion, reference to Cyrus as a “messiah” here corresponds to his selection to fulfill a specific task, but clearly not as the idealized, future Davidic king (Messiah).

¹⁵ For a discussion of “Yahweh’s exclusive prerogative” that makes a similar point centered on Isa. 30-31, see Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion, the City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult*, JSOT Supplement Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 104-30.

¹⁶ Eric Seibert argues that, while the destruction of Jerusalem represents “an indisputable historical fact ... Israel’s *theological interpretation* of that event remains open to question.” Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 165; original emphasis. For a more extended critique of Seibert’s approach, see W. Derek Suderman, “Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God: A Response

violence and evil to Satan (Weaver)¹⁷ threaten to re-create the dualistic or even polytheistic thinking that Isaiah stridently rejects; here Israel's defeat does not reflect the triumph of foreign armies or gods but the discipline of its own deity. If God did not send Israel into exile, then who or what did? In Isaiah such a question is unthinkable, since "I am the LORD and *there is no other*."

God and "Exile" in Jeremiah 29

In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann identifies Jeremiah as "the clearest model for prophetic imagination and ministry" who "embodies the alternative consciousness of Moses in the face of the denying king."¹⁸ Similar to Brueggemann's critique of "royal consciousness," John Howard Yoder describes the "Jeremianic turn" or "shift" as a rejection of the monarchic project and sees life "in exile" as a calling rather than a temporary hiatus;¹⁹ indeed, in his view Jer. 29 provides a key paradigm for the faithful church willing to function without being in control.²⁰ Some who argue for a nonviolent understanding of God have also identified Jer. 29 as particularly significant. For instance, Eric Seibert places it among the "more positive and largely unproblematic" depictions of God,²¹ while J. Denny Weaver identifies it as the key OT passage that allows for the transition to Jesus within "narrative Christus Victor."²² Weaver also views Constantine as the church's fall into a monarchic mode, and appeals directly to Yoder's article just cited to see in Jer. 29 an alternative and the church's true calling. But does this passage prove compatible with an insistence on God's nonviolence?

Where 'II Isaiah' proclaims a new exodus from exile back to the

to Eric Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 151-62.

¹⁷ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 211.

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Second ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 46-47.

¹⁹ John Howard Yoder, "See How They Go with Their Face to the Sun," in *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 60, 64-70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

²¹ As Seibert states: "when discussing disturbing divine behavior in the Old Testament, it is important to keep it in perspective and not to overemphasize it by neglecting the many positive portrayals included there as well." Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 230-31.

²² Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 66-68.

land, Jeremiah's letter instructs his listeners to "seek the welfare of the city" in their Babylonian setting. While helpful for orienting the church to its contemporary vocation in a post-Christendom world, upon closer inspection Jer. 29 reflects the same orientation and logic operative within the broader prophetic corpus. Where we may wish to link Jeremiah's message to a nonviolent view of God, here too God uses foreign powers instrumentally to punish and protect.²³

Jeremiah's letter immediately reflects this prophetic logic: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles *whom I have sent into exile* from Jerusalem to Babylon . . ." (29:4). The conviction that it was God who sent Judah into exile is then reiterated twice more in the letter. First, Jeremiah's initial call to "settle in" to life in Babylon states:

But seek the welfare (*shalom*) of the city
 where I have sent you (caused you to go) into exile,
 and pray to the LORD on its behalf,
 for in its welfare (*shalom*) you will find your welfare (*shalom*).
 (Jer. 29:7)

While it is appropriate to underscore the threefold occurrence of *shalom* to emphasize God's concern for the exiles' "welfare/peace," this portrayal also directly links God to the exile itself. The same dynamic appears when moving from Jeremiah's depiction of the present to a hopeful future:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD,
 plans for your welfare (*shalom*) and not for harm (*ra'ah*),
 to give you a future with hope . . .
 I will let you find me, says the LORD,
 and I will restore your fortunes
 and gather you from all the nations
 and all the places *where I have driven you*, says the LORD,
 and I will bring you back to the place

²³ For my purposes, discussion on the compositional background of this passage is unnecessary. Comments offered here are based on the Hebrew (Masoretic) text; readers should consult commentaries for more detailed exegetical information.

from which I sent you into exile . . . (Jer. 29:11, 14).

Once again, even a description of this hopeful, anticipated future reiterates God's involvement in the disaster of the past. Where we may be tempted to separate God's loving restoration of Israel from its experience of exile, Jeremiah's letter holds both together under God's sovereign rule.

In light of the above discussion of Isa. 45, the pairing of *shalom* (welfare) and *ra'ah* (evil, wickedness, disaster) here should also pique our attention. A passage instructing Jeremiah to speak in the temple a few chapters earlier further exemplifies this connection:

Perhaps if²⁴ they will listen, all of them,
 and will turn from their evil (*ra'ah*) way,
 that I may change my mind about the disaster (*ra'ah*) that I intend to bring
 on them
 because of their evil (*ro'ah*) doings. (Jer. 26:3)²⁵

Far from repudiating Isaiah's claim that God "makes *shalom*" (weal) and "creates *ra'*" (woe),²⁶ Jeremiah also sees the LORD as responsible for both the "disaster" or "calamity" (*ra'ah*) of exile and the future "welfare" (*shalom*) of the people.

Thus, it is problematic to cite God's commitment to restoration and "peace" (*shalom*) in Jeremiah's letter while neglecting to mention God's sovereignty and link to exile as the basic premise for this perspective. Rather, evil/disaster (*ra'ah*) is a major motif in Jeremiah where the people's "evil doings" and lack of repentance prompt God to eventually carry out the

²⁴ I have modified the beginning of the quotation from the NRSV's "It may be that," which softens somewhat the "perhaps (if)" (*ulay*) aspect of the Hebrew here (compare KJV's "If so be ..."). In effect, this verse introduces a hypothetical "if ... then ..." where the people's rejection of "evil" (*ra'ah*) may prompt God's repealing of "disaster" (*ra'ah*).

²⁵ Cf. Jonah 3:8-10, where the hated Ninevites provide a prime example of repentance using the same language, which results in God "changing his mind." See Suderman, "Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God," 153-55.

²⁶ Derived from the same Hebrew root, *ra'ah* represents the corresponding feminine noun to the masculine *ra'*. While Jeremiah appears to prefer the feminine form, the meaning is equivalent.

“disaster” of exile. While Jeremiah’s letter promises that God will someday bring them back, within Jeremiah the exile was clearly God’s doing: “I caused you to be driven out” and “I caused you to go into exile” (29:14).

In light of several scholars’ appeals to Yoder as foundational en route to insisting upon the nonviolence of God, Yoder’s comment regarding Jer. 29 and the implications of a “Jeremianic model” proves particularly striking:

Since God is sovereign over history, there is no need for them [i.e., 1st-century Jews, “including the first Christians”] to seize (or subvert) political sovereignty in order for God’s will to be done. God’s capacity to bring about the fulfillment of his righteous goals is not dependent upon us. . . .²⁷

As Yoder recognizes, Jeremiah’s call to “not be in charge” derives from a conviction of God’s sovereignty over history, and not God’s essential nonviolence. Building on the work of Millard Lind,²⁸ Yoder’s christocentric approach argues that Jesus lived a life of nonviolent obedience not *despite* the at times violent portrayal of God in the OT but at least partly *because* of it. Perhaps most strident and still jarring, Yoder claims that “Far from constituting an embarrassment for those who follow Jesus’ way of non-violence, Hebrew holy war is the historical foundation of the same.”²⁹ While some dispute his general perspective on this point or sideline this statement as a momentary lapse or isolated mistake, Yoder underscores the significance of this point by footnoting several of his own writings for a fuller treatment of the issue.³⁰

Thus, far from peripheral, Yoder’s reading of Jer. 29 exemplifies his conviction that the nonviolence Jesus embodies represents a further

²⁷ Yoder, “See How They Go,” 67.

²⁸ See Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel*, foreword by David Noel Freedman (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980). For a similar contemporary view see Paul Keim, “Is God Non-Violent?” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 25-32.

²⁹ John Howard Yoder, “Is not His Word Like a Fire? The Bible and Civil Turmoil,” in *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 85n11.

³⁰ Yoder himself points readers to his: “To Your Tents, O Israel: The Legacy of Israel’s Experience with Holy War,” *Studies in Religion* 18, no. 9 (1989): 85-104; “If Abraham is Our Father,” in *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifisms* (Scottsdale; Waterloo: Herald Press, 1971), 85-104; and “God Will Fight for Us,” in *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994), 78-89.

development within the ongoing biblical tradition, not a radical departure from it. Where several scholars have used Yoder's work and even the very sources he cites to assert God's nonviolence, Yoder himself did not do so—in fact, such a view seems antithetical to his approach.³¹

So, what to do? Should Christians drop a commitment to nonviolence in the face of the consistent link between violent empires and God in the prophets? Or should they appeal to Jesus in order to claim that the prophets are fundamentally mistaken? Where some scholars have made God's nonviolence a central concern and necessary destination (and foundation?) of a christocentric approach, this tack creates a false dichotomy prompted more by contemporary theological and ethical assumptions than by the biblical portrayal of Jesus' life and ministry. Attending to Jesus' approach to Scripture shifts our attention elsewhere and, since our access to the "earthly Jesus" emerges from his portrayal in the NT, this is an essential place to start.

Recovering Jesus as the Basis of a "Christocentric" Perspective

An abiding concern with the Christian justification of contemporary violence has become an impetus for a christocentric reading of the Bible and an increased insistence upon God's nonviolence, particularly within the Anabaptist tradition. As Ray Gingerich states:

What the writers [of the OT] meant to communicate and what the first readers heard . . . was undoubtedly that God is a warrior. But if we believe in the nonviolence of Jesus, and if we share the common Christian understanding that Jesus was the fullest revelation of God available to humanity, and if we hold the (believers') church to be a present incarnation of Jesus, then it should be clear to us that Yahweh, the God of Jesus, was not a warrior.³²

³¹ Various scholars' claim to "follow Yoder" warrants further discussion that cannot be provided here; see Ray C. Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud, "Is God Nonviolent? The Shape of the Conversation," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 51; Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 13. Suffice it to say, arriving at the same destination (in this case, a nonviolent Christian ethic) does not necessarily entail "following" someone to get there.

³² Ray C. Gingerich, "Theological Foundations for an Ethics of Nonviolence: Was Yoder's God a Warrior?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77 (2003): 430. For similar logic, attempting to uncover the "God Jesus reveals," see: Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 185-87.

At first glance, the logic of such a view seems compelling: Jesus was nonviolent; Jesus reveals God; therefore God must be nonviolent. When confronted with a biblical witness that does not easily conform to this perspective (OT or NT), scholars have variously claimed that: OT writers were mistaken in their theological discernment of God's action in the world;³³ the "cosmology of the ancient Hebrews" or their "theological worldview" should be abandoned;³⁴ a nonviolent understanding of God is pragmatically required and simply "needed";³⁵ and so on. Since such arguments consistently claim a christocentric basis for a radical discontinuity between OT and NT, or at least between Jesus and his Scriptures, it is worth reconsidering how the Gospels portray Jesus' approach.

Immediately following Jesus' baptism and temptation, Luke's account of the episode in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4) offers a helpful place to start. Here the Gospel writer describes a scene in which a direct quotation from Isaiah provides the basic "platform" that introduces Jesus' ministry.³⁶ Rather than discuss the content of this quotation, however, I will consider the implications of this passage for a christocentric approach.

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor . . ."
(Luke 4:16-18)

At first glance this passage may seem somewhat unremarkable. However, like any scriptural scroll in the first century, the one handed to Jesus would not have been divided into numbered chapters and verses, nor did it contain vowels. Faced with what in our Bible constitutes 66 chapters of

³³ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 164-65.

³⁴ Gingerich, "Theological Foundations for an Ethics of Non-Violence": 434-35.

³⁵ Ted Grimsrud, "Is God Non-Violent?" *The Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 13-17.

³⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 28-33.

text, the seemingly simple act of “finding the place” is a significant feat.³⁷ The ability not only to read but even to find the place implies that Jesus knew the Isaiah scroll very well.

Most importantly, this passage also identifies the root of Jesus’ ability to read the scroll that was given to him: “he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, *as was his custom*. . . .” (4:16). This is the key here and an essential condition for any discussion of Christian hermeneutics, since it reflects the core partnership underlying Jesus’ hermeneutics and our own: the link between a reading community and a scripture to be read. The scroll Jesus or anyone else read was accompanied by a reading tradition, which was and is only maintained and passed on through a reading community.³⁸

At a pivotal moment near the beginning of Luke’s account, Jesus is handed a scroll without chapters and verses or even vowels, out of which he finds and reads the Isaiah passage that outlines his ministry. In light of our above discussion, this act proves particularly striking. Here Jesus reads from Isaiah 61, a passage sandwiched between two depictions of God as a “warrior.” In Isa. 59, disgusted by a lack of justice and human intervention, God clothes himself as a warrior to bring about salvation/deliverance (59:15-18). A second passage describes God’s cloak being stained from stomping in the wine press as a graphic metaphor for having executed vengeance on the peoples, also described as his “redeeming work” (63:2-6).³⁹ As these passages show, ‘III Isaiah’ is not immune from depicting God as executing vengeance and functioning as a judge. While we may be tempted to see Jesus’ reading from Isaiah 61 in isolation, the broader context of the passage he invokes is

³⁷ While some contend this may have been an assigned reading from the prophets (*haftarah*), Joseph Fitzmyer suggests that “It sounds as if Jesus deliberately sought out this passage.” Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, I-IX*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 532.

³⁸ Yoder also draws attention to the central importance of the synagogue, calling “the culture of the synagogue ... the most fundamental sociological innovation in the history of religions.” Yoder, “See How They Go,” 71.

³⁹ For an extended discussion of the “divine warrior” in Isa. 59, with some discussion of Isa. 63, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God: The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 15-47. Yoder Neufeld has also fruitfully explored the transformation of this image in the NT: see “Divine Warfare in the New Testament,” in *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 122-49; and *Ephesians* (Scottsdale; Waterloo: Herald Press, 2002), 290-316.

far from 'pacific' in its portrayal of God.

Where a connection to such a depiction of God lies implicit in Luke 4, the Gospel writers portray Jesus explicitly drawing upon various "disturbing" aspects of 'I Isaiah' to describe his own ministry. For instance, all three synoptic Gospels link Jesus' extensive use of parables with the "call" of the prophet in Isaiah 6 (Mark 4:10-12; Matt. 13:13-15; Luke 8:9-10):

Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed. (Isa. 6:10)

In effect, Jesus and the Gospel writers link his use of parables with an attempt to cloud rather than make plain a call to repentance. In the Gospels this reference both explains why many fail to "hear" his message and signals a message of judgment on the contemporary generation. Similarly, in all three synoptics Jesus draws explicitly upon Isaiah's "song of the vineyard" and its judgment motif, inserting himself as the "son" into this passage to condemn the religious leaders of his day (Matt. 21:33-44; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19). Although some contemporary scholars downplay the link between Jesus and judgment, the Gospel writers depict Jewish leaders as immediately recognizing this element of the parable, which Matthew and Luke then tie directly to the leaders' animosity towards and persecution of Jesus.⁴⁰ Rather than antithetical, the judgment motif underlying the perspective

⁴⁰ For instance, while Ted Grimsrud discusses Jesus' parable of the vineyard he neglects to address either its retributive orientation or the significant continuity between Jesus' teaching and the OT on this topic. His portrayal of the vineyard as the temple and not the people also proves puzzling in light of its precedent in Isaiah. Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement: the Bible's Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books. 2013), 104-105. For contrasting perspectives on the judgment motif in Jesus' parables, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, "Forgive, or Else!" in *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament*, 36-56, and Eric A. Seibert, "Appendix A: Reexamining the Nonviolent God," in *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 245-54. Contra Seibert, the judgment in the "vineyard" parable does not appear to be eschatological in nature but one with immediate implications.

of the Gospels here proves similar to the prophets' view of exile as God's punishment.

Finally, like his Jewish counterparts then and now, in the Gospels Jesus celebrates Passover. Thus, while Seibert claims that "Jesus never endorses or promotes a view of God as a divine warrior who fights physical battles on behalf of a 'chosen people,'"⁴¹ Jesus *does* celebrate God as revealed in the Exodus, which recounts the story of God's deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians and provides the paradigmatic portrayal of the LORD as a "warrior." Again, far from a mere tangential element, this celebration in turn provides the context for the "last supper" and the basis for communion or the Lord's Supper in the Christian tradition.

Thus, in light of the Gospel portrayals of Jesus, appealing to a christocentric approach as a basis for asserting the nonviolence of God proves problematic. For instance, Seibert contends that "while certain passages in Isaiah might lead one to believe that God is violent . . . it is clearly not the way Jesus understood God."⁴² However, limiting the link between God and violence to "certain passages in Isaiah" does not account for how deeply this issue permeates this book and other prophetic material. Nor does it adequately recognize the extent to which Isaiah in particular informs the NT material, including its portrayal and understanding of Jesus.

While it may be tempting to assume that Jesus affirmed the comfort and restoration of 'II Isaiah' but rejected the divine anger and judgment prevalent within the larger Isaiah scroll, in the Gospels he not only appeals to the breadth of this document but plays upon its basic conviction that God is sovereign and willing to intervene to execute judgment. Similarly, NT writers do not quote this or that passage while disputing Isaiah's basic orientation. Indeed, along with the Psalms, they cite and allude to Isaiah more than any other scriptural scroll, so that it provides a primary lens for viewing Jesus' life, ministry, death, and ongoing significance. Far from tangential, this prophetic tradition and its insistence on God's sovereignty orients NT material and its portrayal of Jesus.

Is God compassionate and merciful, abounding in steadfast love? Most certainly. Is this Jesus' innovation? Not at all, but a central OT creedal

⁴¹ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 195.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 195.

affirmation.⁴³ In this sense Jesus exemplifies again how the patience, compassion, and mercy of God lead to a deferral of judgment.⁴⁴ However, is God also angered by injustice and committed to render judgment in order to set things right? Absolutely. Does Jesus reject such a view of God? By no means! Where some suggest we must choose between such attributes so that “God either is or is not merciful,”⁴⁵ the biblical witness, including its portrayal of Jesus, defies such easy categorization. Instead of depicting God as nonviolent, the NT as well as the OT holds divine judgment and mercy in a creative, uneasy, and provocative tension.⁴⁶

Scripture and Community: On Recommitting to “Christocentric Hermeneutics”

While some scholars portray the nonviolence of God as a necessary theological foundation for Christian ethics, a christocentric approach grounded in how the Gospels portray Jesus interpreting *his* Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, shifts the discussion substantially. In effect, where Yoder insisted that the “politics of Jesus” should be recognized as central for Christian ethics, we could say that the “hermeneutics of Jesus” should also be recognized as significant for ongoing Christian interpretation. And rather than “construct” a nonviolent God to ground his nonviolence, the Jesus of the Gospels studies, memorizes, and re-interprets the Scriptures he treasured. Where some posit a radical discontinuity between the testaments, or between Jesus and OT material linking God to violence, Luke witnesses to Jesus’ habitual participation in a reading community, dedicated to ongoing interaction with Isaiah and other scriptural scrolls.

When viewed in light of Jesus’ hermeneutics, a christocentric approach

⁴³ See Ex. 34:6-7, which Fretheim identifies as “the most oft-repeated Old Testament confession regarding God.” Terence E. Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God: In a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 120-21.

⁴⁴ See Neh. 9, which presents a biblical theology in miniature that builds directly on the compassion and mercy of God depicted in Ex. 34: “But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love ...” (Neh. 9:17b).

⁴⁵ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 173.

⁴⁶ For appeals against a reduction of this tension in OT and NT material respectively, see Suderman, “Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God” and Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Enmity*. Indeed, as the latter points out, judgment lies implicit within the very idea of mercy, so that eliminating the former removes the possibility of the latter as well (53-54).

does not provide a criterion for dismissing parts or concepts of the OT—even links between God and violence or the depiction of God as a “warrior”—so much as a model for how to re-interpret and live in light of these Scriptures that values, builds upon, and transforms them. For instance, far from dismissing the Hebrew cosmology or worldview as outdated, NT writers draw directly from the very scrolls and specific passages contemporary scholars find problematic. Like these writers, attending to Jesus pushes us to draw on the breadth and depth of the scriptural tradition instead of abstracting from the Gospels a theological or ethical center regarding God’s nonviolence.

Thankfully, the prophetic view linking suffering to wrongdoing and divine judgment is not the only one in the OT or NT, and we do well to explore the diversity within the Bible. However, the prominence of this perspective within the biblical tradition also means that it should not be dismissed or deemed fundamentally mistaken, but taken seriously as a legitimate possibility requiring contextual discernment. Where some treat the Bible as a complicated tangle from which to emerge with a relatively homogeneous view of a nonviolent God, the biblical tradition provides the training ground and hermeneutical arena in which to make sense of the world and our place in it.⁴⁷ Far from tame, the prophets’ depiction of God is *supposed* to make us uncomfortable, just as it unsettled their early listeners.

In our day as in the time of Jesus we witness contested interpretations of the Bible and tradition. Some appeal to “God as a warrior” to legitimate militarization, human violence, and contemporary occupations; some employ biblical vocabulary to support claims of national exceptionalism; some use God’s commitment to the king in the OT to insist upon their “divine right” or “manifest destiny” in the present realm. However, ongoing abuse of a link between God and violence does not mean that we should jettison concepts or parts of the Bible, but rather that we should insist on taking the prophetic conviction of God’s sovereignty more seriously.

⁴⁷ Waldemar Janzen, “A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation,” in *Reclaiming the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of Waldemar Janzen*, ed. Gordon Zerke (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 2001), 14-21. In a similar vein, Gordon Matties’s “hospitable hermeneutics” allows even the difficult book of Joshua “to have its say within the larger chorus of voices we call Scripture” Gordon H. Matties, *Joshua* (Harrisonburg, VA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2012), 20.

For instance, for Isaiah and other prophets the claim “in God we trust” renders horses and chariots—in our day, tanks and bombers—utterly obsolete. The debate lies not between a leaner but more advanced armament that has left horses and bayonets behind and the commitment to make the military so strong “no one will dare to challenge us,”⁴⁸ but rather a reliance on the *LORD* of hosts (instead of the President as Commander in Chief) as ultimately in control. While contemporary pundits may couch claims of American exceptionalism in biblical vocabulary to justify military expenditure, the prophets point to God’s sovereignty to *negate* the need for militarization.⁴⁹ Where military powers today use biblical euphemisms to depict themselves as instruments of divine judgment,⁵⁰ the prophets insist that God is free and able to use even foreign powers to execute judgment on Israel. Where some portray contemporary geopolitical struggles as a battle between good and evil that points the finger elsewhere and functionally places ourselves above reproach, the prophets call for repentance and *self-critique*.

In no way outdated, the prophets offer the basis for pointed contemporary critique. However, coming to these biblical books with an *a priori* conviction of God’s nonviolence threatens to dismiss this material and dismantle its insights relevant for our day. For instance, if the prophets were fundamentally mistaken in their understanding of God, how can we appeal to their persistent call for social justice? Further, if we “construct” God ourselves, on what basis can we criticize those who appeal to the rise of global “terror” and the uncertainty of our times in order to construct a *violent* God, rejecting biblical elements that suggest otherwise?

In his context Jesus did not refrain from interpreting Scripture

⁴⁸ During a televised debate in the 2012 US election campaign, incumbent President Barack Obama articulated the former perspective and Republican challenger Mitt Romney the latter.

⁴⁹ As Ben Ollenburger concludes regarding the implications of biblical “divine kingship,” particularly for North American Christians: “It is just because God exercises the royal prerogative exclusively that no other attempts, human or divine, to exercise this prerogative are legitimate.” Ollenburger, *Zion the City of the Great King*, 159.

⁵⁰ For instance, naming military drones “Reaper” and corresponding missiles “Hellfire” implies that, in the words of John Sifton of Human Rights Watch, “the United States was fate itself, cutting down enemies who were destined to die.” Daniel Schwartz, “From ‘Bug-Splat’ to ‘Targeted Killing,’ the Drone-Speak Lexicon,” *CBC News: World* (February 8, 2013), www.cbc.ca/news/world.

because others were misusing it, but rather entered the fray, engaged in vigorous debate, and articulated an alternate perspective. In a similar manner, we dare not abdicate the interpretation of the OT while insisting on a NT perspective.⁵¹ Adopting a christocentric approach should inspire *more* commitment to OT interpretation rather than less, orienting believing communities to the hermeneutical task of “reading” ourselves and our times in light of the testimony of Scripture.⁵² Like Jesus, we find ourselves in the midst of an interpretive struggle that requires an ongoing commitment to become, and continuously embody, the reading community Scripture both creates and requires.⁵³

Thus, while the challenge of a christocentric approach lies in following Jesus’ lead, this is primarily a contextual, hermeneutical issue rather than an abstract philosophical one. Upholding Jesus as an ethical or epistemological center departs from a purported christocentric orientation when it sidelines the continuous wrestling with Scripture he exemplifies. In effect, when we deem the Bible so ambiguous or outdated that we construct God with our own acumen, the hermeneutical struggle is over before it has begun. In contrast, Jesus’ life of nonviolent obedience emerges from a hermeneutical wrestling grounded in immersing himself in his Scripture as part of a reading community.

Now as then such a community is formed, sustained, and passed on only by reading, studying, and debating the strange language of the Bible. For those devoted to a christocentric approach, the Gospels’ portrayal begs the question: as we witness to Christ’s peace, are *we* committed to follow in the way of Jesus by forming reading communities committed to wade through

⁵¹ For a critique of the contemporary Anabaptist tendency to privilege the NT over the OT, including a contrast of the function of this perspective in the Reformation and today, see Waldemar Janzen, “A Canonical Rethinking of the Anabaptist-Mennonite New Testament Orientation.”

⁵² Despite my concerns with his approach, Seibert’s sustained efforts to this end are particularly noteworthy: see his *Disturbing Divine Behavior* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) and *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

⁵³ For an extended discussion of this topic related to the contemporary role and function of biblical lament, including violent imprecation, see W. Derek Suderman, “The Cost of Losing Lament for the Community of Faith: On Brueggemann, Ecclesiology, and the Social Audience of Prayer,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (2012): 201-18.

verse after verse, chapter after chapter, scroll after scroll? Do we dedicate ourselves to wrestle with difficult, seemingly foreign “texts,” refusing to let go until we emerge with a blessing?⁵⁴ Adopting a christocentric approach invites us to follow Jesus’ example by studying what *we* call the Old Testament to attend to the very voice of God—even and perhaps especially when it clashes with our own expectations or assumptions.

Conclusion

Despite appeals to Jer. 29 by scholars who insist upon a nonviolent understanding of God, this passage bursts the bounds of such a concept. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah’s letter asserts that God both seeks the welfare (*shalom*) of Israel and is responsible for the disaster (*ra’ah*) of exile. Here too the LORD can use foreign powers, including their military might, to carry out divine judgment and restoration. Rather than a theological mistake to be corrected, this perspective underscores Christian Scripture’s basic claim regarding God’s sovereignty over Israel, history, and creation.

This article has called for a shift away from constructing God to fit our theological or ethical categories and towards discipleship as the most appropriate grounds for a Christian commitment to peace. In so doing, I have argued that following Jesus entails adopting a hermeneutical stance that seeks to hear the voice of God by attending closely to the theological witness of Scripture. In effect, a christocentric approach should prompt those committed to follow after Jesus to value and study the Scriptures that informed, inspired, and set the direction for his ministry—what we call an “Old Testament” but were the only Scriptures he had. Thus, rather than a means for functionally excluding biblical material linking God to violence on one hand or concepts such as the understanding of God as a warrior on the other, a christocentric approach should instead prompt immersion in the very Scriptures Jesus and NT writers treasured.

Living as Christians necessarily represents a hermeneutical task, forming communities that are able not to be “in charge” because they believe that the God of resurrection and life is ultimately in control. Doing so does not require an abridged Bible or an innovative construction of God so much

⁵⁴ Yoder Neufeld helpfully points to the account of Jacob wrestling in Gen. 32 as an image for engaging Scripture: *Killing Enmity*, 151-52.

as sustained, profound, and convicting encounters with the divine through the breadth and depth of Christian Scripture. But for Scripture to function as such it requires an interpreting community, and it is this fundamental partnership between scriptural text and communal context that, with the guidance of the Spirit, provides the basis for christocentric hermeneutics. Indeed, it was largely the innovation of the synagogue and just such reading communities that allowed the Jewish and later Christian traditions to survive—from exile in Babylon, through the destruction of the second temple, to the ends of the earth.

In sum, christocentric hermeneutics builds on a confessional stance that dares to believe, against persistent appearances to the contrary, that God is ultimately in control and can be trusted to bring history to its culmination. While some claim that dropping the concept of God as a warrior or links between God and violence strengthens our commitment to peace, as Yoder insisted it is rather the prophets' conviction of God's sovereignty that provides the necessary basis for both the nonviolence of Jesus and contemporary Christian pacifism.

In living out Jesus' gospel of peace, we do well to attend to this simple passage:

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth . . . he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. . . . He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (Luke 4:16-18)

For those committed to a christocentric perspective, the continuing challenge lies in embodying the reading and interpreting communities that this passage assumes by redoubling our own commitment to this crucial custom that grounded Jesus' life and ministry.

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