# BEYOND FALSE PIETY AND RESIGNATION: APPROPRIATING THE OLD TESTAMENT VIOLENT PORTRAYALS OF GOD IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA

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## Abstract

*The systemic use of violence in God's name by colonialists, slave-traders, inquisitors, crusaders, etc., has made believers and unbelievers wonder whether the God of the Old Testament himself, rather than his believers, is not the one to blame as morally problematic. In other words, does not the violence perpetrated in God's name proceed from the fact that YHWH himself is a violent god, and therefore not worthy of human worship and praises? In this essay, I address the question of how to handle biblical texts depicting divine violence (direct and indirect violence) within the current context of violence and trauma. The purpose of the essay is to suggest some ways in which violent images of God can be useful/therapeutic to African traumatized communities*.

**Keywords:** *Violence, Trauma, Old Testament, Appropriation, Healing*.

## 1. Introduction

The Old Testament and its portrayals of God are often associated with the dark legacy of violence against women, colonized people, children, and anyone else whose behavior is deemed ungodly. That violence perpetrated against others is considered repulsive, especially because it is presented as a pious execution of a divine mandate. From the early days of Christianity, passing through the Crusades and the Inquisition, to the transatlantic slave trade and the colonization of black nations, God and the Bible (Old Testament) were presented as promoters of violence against those considered different from the dominant views of orthodoxy. This systemic use of violence in God's name has made believers and unbelievers wonder whether the God of the Old Testament himself, rather than his believers, is

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not the one to blame as morally problematic. In other words, does not the violence perpetrated in God's name proceed from the fact that YHWH *himself is a violent god,* and therefore not worthy of human worship and praises? In his *God Delusion,* atheist biologist Richard Dawkins notes that The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.[2]

Dawkins's opinion is shared by many Christian readers of the Old Testament, especially in Europe and the United States. The proposal of the US evangelical scholar, C.S. Cowles, to repudiate the Old Testament because it is appalling and superseded, is characteristic of that uneasiness felt about the Old Testament. For Cowles, it is only 'with great difficulty' can we harmonize the 'warrior God of Israel with the God of love incarnate in Jesus.'[3] The God of the New Testament, he alleges, preaches love of the enemy and does not command the annihilation of sinners and foreigners as does the God of the Old Testament.[4] It is imperative, therefore, *not* to consider the Old Testament as expressing God's moral being, will or activity: the portrayal of God in the Old Testament should be considered as unreliable because it contradicts what Christians know about God through Jesus-Christ.[5] Other Christian readers of the Old Testament have suggested that we simply discard certain parts of the Old Testament because they depict violence and associate violence with God.[6] For those scholars, a good God cannot get involved in the messiness of war, violence, oppression, and discrimination. In the words of Cowles, the only image of God that can speak to Christian believers is that of a God who accepts being killed (Jesus), 'rather than sinners being exterminated, children being dashed to pieces, and wives being raped.'[7]

[2] Dawkins, *The God Delusion,* 31.
[3] Cowles, 'The Case for Radical Discontinuity,' 14.
[4] Cowles, 'The Case for Radical Discontinuity,' 27-29.
[5] Cowles, 'The Case for Radical Discontinuity,' 18.
[6]See Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel*, 281.
[7] Cowles, 'The Case for Radical Discontinuity,' 42.

Black Africa and its diaspora have had a complex relationship with the Bible, its portrayal of God, and especially the history of biblical interpretation. It must be acknowledged that the Old Testament offers a complex portrayal of God and of God's relationship with human beings. From the Pentateuch to the prophetic books, there is no part of the Old Testament where God is not involved in violence, both against his people and against foreign nations.

In this essay, I address the question of how to handle biblical texts depicting divine violence (direct and indirect violence) within the current context of violence and trauma. The purpose of the essay is not to explain divine violence in the Old Testament or to offer a universally applicable point of view on divine violence, but to suggest some ways in which violent images of God can be useful to African traumatized communities. Because black people have often been victims of the misuses of the Old Testament's depictions of God, African theologians and ordinary Christians have been cautious about uncritically appropriating biblical texts and their portrayals of God. Critical evaluation of texts is certainly important, but it seems to me that the kind of hermeneutics of suspicion that appropriates 'the Bible selectively and critically,' using only 'portions, texts and stories of the bible which [are] regarded, in the light of the interests [of a community] to be supportive of the immediate and long term goals of the majority of that religious community'[8] is not a viable option, especially as it pertains to the biblical portrayals of God as violent and commanding violence. Arguing that one's context of interpretation shapes the way one understands biblical texts and appropriates the violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament, I show that, despite the violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament and the violent legacy of the (mis)use of the Old Testament by Christian believers, black Christians cannot afford to discard the image of God as presented in the Old Testament. Indeed, those who are 'fortunate' to live in places with limited exposure to violence and those equipped with some kind of justice systems might be repulsed by the image of God taking vengeance or punishing a sinner. In traumatized communities of black Africa, however, very few are lucky enough to afford to reject the image of a God who can take vengeance and punish. In fact, in those areas destroyed by chronic conflicts and widespread impunity, a violent

[8] Mofokeng, 'Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation,' 40.

portrayal of God can be therapeutic because it assures the many victims of wanton violence that justice (at least divine justice) is possible. Further, the essay will show that embracing the angry God of the Old Testament (not letting him off the hook but protesting against his ways) is the best way to live in intimacy with him. I will begin the essay with a brief description of our context of interpretation (describing the experience of African black Christian communities). Next, I will select some Old Testament 'texts of terror'[9] to show how/why those texts have been 'decanonized' by some biblical interpreters. I will finish the essay with a guarded appraisal of the therapeutic use of violent images of God within black communities destroyed by conflicts, violence, and impunity.

## 2. Black Experiences and Biblical Interpretations

It is a truism that there is no such thing as a 'homogeneous black experience' shared by all black people. African Americans (living in the diaspora) and indigenous Africans, for example, do not have the same histories and do not have the same life experiences. Even within mainland Africa, black people's experiences are as diverse as their cultures and traditions. The following description of the black experience does not intend to offer a detailed analysis of every black experience but focuses on black Africans and attempts to sketch a general picture that highlights the similarities among black experiences, to clarify the context from which I interpret violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament.

Any discussion of the modern African continent must consider the effects of Western imperial domination on the black continent. As defined by Edward Said, imperialism 'means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; 'colonialism,' which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory.'[10] Western imperialism in Africa took two related forms: the transatlantic slave trade and colonization. While the transatlantic slave trade depopulated Africa and dismantled many of its communities by deporting large groups of its

[9] This phrase describes, according to Phyllis Trible, 'tales of terror with women as victims' (Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 1). In this essay, that phrase refers to stories of violence and injustice with God as perpetrator or instigator.
[10] Said, *Culture and Imperialism,* 9.

population to the Americas, colonization fundamentally transformed the black continent through land grabbing, cultural erasure, the imposition of European modes of life, and the confiscation of important natural resources.[11] Slave trade and colonization, even after they have officially ended, continue to have a significant influence on the lives of black Africans, especially through neocolonial modes of domination. In the words of Musa Dube, 'Under the facade of multinational corporations, universal media, and international monetary bodies, military and ideological muscle imperialism has proven its capacity to mutate and persist in ever new and remarkable forms – what is now termed globalization or neo-colonization.'[12]

Slave trade, colonization, and neo-colonization are not the only culprits of the woes of the African continent. In addition to them, we need to pay attention to how the continent is disfigured by its own current children whose greed, tribalism, and ambitions have transformed most of it into sites of maiming, abductions, massacres, and summary executions.[13] The ubiquity of violence and impunity in many parts of the African continent makes conflict, violence, and the absence of the rule of law some of the most urgent concerns for African biblical interpreters. Musa Dube is right to say that 'biblical interpretation in sub-Saharan Africa cannot be separated from politics, economics, and cultural identity, of the past and present. Biblical interpretation in the African continent is thus intimately locked in the framework of scramble for land, struggle for economic justice and struggle for cultural survival.'[14] Moreover, without good leadership or the rule of law, the continent becomes an arena where the fittest profit from all the resources to the detriment of the lives of the weak. If contemporary experience can be considered the starting point of our biblical interpretation, then the context of violence, bloodshed, and impunity is our context. That is, we read the Old Testament violent portrayals of God, as people of faith, from the context of the victims of unlimited violence and impunity in black Africa. In the next section, I examine the violent

[11] Lugard, 'The Value of British Rule in the Tropics to the British Democracy and the Native Races,' 41.
[12] Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* 48.
[13] See Onyumbe Wenyi, *Piles of Slain, Heaps of Corpses,* 40-41.
[14] Dube, 'The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial perspectives,' 4.

portrayals of God in two texts representing God as inflicting violence (Nahum) and commanding violence (Deuteronomy 7).

## 3. Nahum and Deuteronomy 7

Nahum and Deuteronomy 7 are among the texts that offer violent portrayals of God. I have selected these two texts because they are representatives of the two ways in which God is involved in violence in the Old Testament: as inflicting violence and as commanding/encouraging violence. As I showed it elsewhere, the book of Nahum 'depicts a world of desolation, devastation, and destruction: a world of 'piles of slain, heaps of corpses' (3:3),'[15] in which God uses violence to confront and punish Nineveh because of its violence against other nations. In Deuteronomy 7, one of the farewell instructions of Moses to the Israelites at the threshold of the promise land, YHWH is not active in perpetrating violence, but commands it by asking the Israelites to destroy the native Canaanites and show them no mercy. I now closely look at each of the texts.

### Nahum

The book of Nahum is one of the shortest of the Old Testament, but it is also one of the most shocking because of its portrayals of God. The three-chapter book is a long poem with two parts (1: 1-11 and 1:12 – 3: 19), in which the poet shows how YHWH intended to deal with the violent neo-Assyrian empire because of Assyrian violence against weaker nations. In 722 BCE, Assyria, under Shalmaneser V (727–722 BCE), dismantled the northern kingdom of Israel (see 1 Kgs 17: 1-6). Twenty years later, Sennacherib attacked and captured all the Judahite fortified cities, leaving only Jerusalem.[16] In the bas-reliefs that covered the walls of Room XXXVI of his 'Palace without Rival,' King Sennacherib celebrates the capture and destruction of the Judahite garrison city of Lachish in 701 BCE.[17] The analysis of the depiction of the war in these Assyrian icons (the Lachish reliefs) shows unlimited use of violence by the Assyrian monarch. As I showed in *Piles of Slain,* the book of Nahum should be read within 'the larger context of Assyrian ideologies of domination and royal propaganda' and readers can, heuristically, 'focus attention on the Assyrian icons as an

[15] Onyumbe Wenyi, *Piles of Slain, Heaps of Corpses,* xvii.
[16] See Cogan, *The Raging Torrent,* 114-15.
[17] Ussishkin, 'The 'Lachish Reliefs' and the City of Lachish,' 177.

indirect witness to the kind of audience to which the book of Nahum would have spoken 'prophetically,' and […] identify the survivors of the destruction of Lachish as a model audience.'[18] Read thus, Nahum 'conveys the message that violence against Assyria will be a response to' Assyrian unlimited violence against other nations.[19]

The first part of the book offers a majestic depiction of God, making it clear that the main agent in the poem is YHWH, the God of Israel. It begins with the description of God as jealous (*qannôʾ*), vengeful (*nōqēm*), possessed of wrath (*baʿal ḥēmāh*), keeping [anger] for his enemies, even though he is slow to anger. YHWH is great in power and not letting anyone [guilty] go unpunished (Nah 1:2-3). The poem next vividly shows the manifestation of YHWH within the tumultuous conditions of clouds, whirlwind, and storm, rebuking the sea and shattering rocks (1:3b-6). In this part of the poem, we are shown how YHWH is not absent from the conditions of violence and how YHWH can take vengeance on those who oppose his plans or oppress others.

The second part of the book is made of YHWH's graphic description of what he intends to do to Nineveh (synecdochally representing the Assyrians) whose violence is experienced by all the nations (see 3:19). In this speech, YHWH indicts Nineveh for planning evil against YHWH and considering herself exceptional. Nineveh has not learned from the fate of other violent nations (e.g. No-Amon/Egypt) to understand that violent nations end in destruction (see 3: 8-18). Nineveh is also accused of violent crimes, especially of invading foreign nations (2:1), plundering them through violence and terrorizing diplomacy (2:12-14), and engaging in bloodshed, deception, sorcery, and debauchery (3: 1-4). In response to these Ninevite crimes, YHWH decides to take vengeance: to humiliate and expose Nineveh to rape (3: 5-6) and obliterate her memory from the earth, make her grave, and end her unlimited violence against others (1:14). YHWH's decision leads to a gruesome attack on the Assyrian capital city. The poet describes, with acute details, the weapons of the attacking army (2:4), the approach of the attacking army (2:5), the attempts of the defending army to protect the city (2:6), and the entry of the attacking army

[18] Onyumbe Wenyi, *Piles of Slain, Heaps of Corpses,* 83, 87.
[19] Onyumbe Wenyi, *Piles of Slain, Heaps of Corpses*, 87.

into Nineveh (2:7). The battle scene is characterized by a series of exclamations 'that give the reader the impression of finding herself within the battle scene and listening to the poet comment on the unfolding battle (2:8–11).'[20] The result of the attack on the city is:

Devastation! Desolation! Destruction!
Hearts melt! Knees tremble!
Anguish in all loins!
The faces of all are in grief! (2: 10).

Nineveh will be laid waste with no one to comfort her (3:7). Because of the vivid depiction of the scenes of war in Nahum, and especially because of YHWH's involvement in violence, some modern scholars have considered this book as 'narrow and shallow prophetism'[21] whose portrayal of God is a 'throwback to the God of battles of the early days of the kingdom,' and 'a militant nationalist [who] infers that Judah is not as other nations, especially Assyria.'[22] In her *Women's Bible Commentary* on Nahum, Sanderson asks: 'What would it mean to worship a God who is portrayed as raping women when angry?... To involve God in an image of sexual violence is, in a profound way, somehow to justify it and thereby sanction it for human males who are for any reason angry with a woman.'[23]

Before we try to understand whether the violent images of God presented in Nahum make the worship of YHWH unreasonable or not, we turn first to the book of Deuteronomy, where YHWH commands the Israelites to engage in violence.

**Deuteronomy 7: 1-5**

Within Moses' farewell discourse to Israel, we find his instructions about how the invading Israelites should deal with the native Canaanites:

When YHWH, your God, brings you into the land which you are about to enter to possess, and he removes many nations before you (the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and powerful than you) and when YHWH, your

[20] Onyumbe Wenyi, *Piles of Slain, Heaps of Corpses,* 159.
[21] Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel*, 281.
[22] Cleland, 'Exposition on Nahum,' 957.
[23] Sanderson, 'Nahum,' 221.

God gives them over to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: make no covenant with them or show them no mercy. (Deut 7:1-3)

This passage describes what is often termed 'the Canaanite genocide.'[24] After freeing the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, YHWH leads them to a land claimed to be good, 'flowing with milk and honey' (see Exo 3:17). The problem is that the land that YHWH intends to give to the Israelites is not unoccupied: it already belongs to seven bigger nations.[25] As John J. Collins shows it, 'the liberation of the Israelites and the subjugation of the Canaanites are two sides of the same coin. Without a land of their own, the liberated Israelites would have nowhere to go, but the land promised to them was not empty and had its own inhabitants. Read from the Canaanite perspective, this is not a liberating story at all.'[26] In addition, YHWH does not want Israel to share the land of Canann with the original occupants as did Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Gen 12:6). The reason God gives for destroying the Canaanites is not that they were evil or committed any wrongdoing, but because YHWH loves and chose Israel (7: 7-8) and because the Canaanites represented a threat to Israel's exclusive allegiance to YHWH: 'because they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods; then the anger of YHWH would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly' (Deut 7: 4). Therefore, the Israelites are commanded, in addition, to break their altars, dash their pillars in pieces, cut down their *asherim*, and burn their graven images' (7:5).

Throughout the history of the interpretation of the command to exterminate the Canaanites, Jews and Christians offered various explanations,

[24] Cowles et al (eds.). *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide,* Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2001. It should be noted that the use of the modern term 'genocide' in contemporary biblical commentaries to refer to the extermination of the Canaanites often intends to evoke the 20th century ethnic cleansings of Jews, Armenians and Rwandan Tutsis. Even though the Canaanites were meant to be destroyed for religious (not ethnic) reasons, many scholars prefer to use that term to make the connection with the contemporary manifestations of violence that lead to the destructions of entire populations.

[25] See Wafawanaka, 'The Land is Mine!' 222.

[26] Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas,' 9.

including allegorizing, rejecting, and downplaying the seriousness and the historical reliability of the command.[27] However, all the attempts to explain away the violence of this text (and of similar texts) do not make the text more palatable. The spread of religiously motivated violence also makes a text like Deuteronomy 7 more suspect.

Writing about YHWH's command to destroy the Canaanites, Stephen Chapman has argued thus:

The explicit reason given for the ban is the prevention of idolatry (Ex 22:19[20]; 23:24, 32-33; Deut 7:4-5; 20:18). It was feared that not destroying idols and other holy objects, or incorporating foreign worshipers into the Israelite community, would occasion idolatry or religious syncretism on the part of the Israelites. The wholesale slaughter of human beings for this reason is not any less horrible, but it should still be taken into account that such slaughter is not being authorized out of vengeance, rage or ethnic hatred but self-protection.[28]

It is true that when read from the perspective of the Canaanites, the command to use the ban makes it difficult for them (Canaanites) to consider Israel as source of blessings for all the nations (Gen 12: 2; 22:18). However, Chapman shows that the ban was never intended to be applied beyond the limits of the conquest of the promise land, and it was allowed only for the seven specific nations:

The book of Deuteronomy invokes the ban against the indigenous residents of Canaan, none of whom are to be spared (Deut 7:1; 20:17; cf. Ex 23:23), but in this way the book also *restricts the ban from wider application*. Only with respect to *these* nations and *only* within the specific context of gaining and protecting the land is the military ban to be employed by Israel. Outside of Canaan, in fact, terms of peace are to be offered first, and only if peace is rejected are captured males to be killed. Women, children, livestock and booty may be kept by the Israelites in this case (Deut 20:10-15).[29]

[27] Van Ruiten, 'The Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7 and the Book of Jubilees,' 152-55.
[28] Chapman, 'Martial Memory, Peaceable Vision,' 57.
[29] Chapman, 'Martial Memory, Peaceable Vision,' 59. Emphasis added.

It has been shown that the redaction of the book of Deuteronomy was completed many centuries after the events that the book describes, at a time when all the seven nations against which the ban was to be applied no longer existed. For Ellen F. Davis, during the Assyrian period, 'the Deuteronomists used the seven nations as a literary stand-in for the one 'great and powerful nation' that threatened Judah militarily, culturally, and religiously: Assyria itself.'[30]

As we will see below, even though Deuteronomy 7 was one of the texts used by colonial powers to subjugate African people, rejecting that image of God in the African context would deprive the African believers of an essential resource to deal with the experience of violence in their communities.

**4. Appropriation of Violent Images of God**

It must be recalled at the outset of this section that the Old Testament is not merely a constellation of images of divine violence. One also encounters various instances when God is portrayed as forbidding violence (e.g. Gen 4:10), compassionate (e.g. Gen 16: 11; Exo 3: 7-8), patient and inclusive (Jonah), etc. What transpires from the Old Testament is that God's statements and behavior are sometimes context-bound and can be meaningful in some contexts while they are repulsive in others. Without using the argument about the multiplicity of those images to downplay the seriousness of violent divine images, we can understand that the multiplicity of images of God calls for humility and moderation/measure. In other words, those contradictory images express the mysterious nature of the God of the Bible, whose character cannot be exhaustively expressed by a set of decontextualized attributes. As John J. Collins shows, interpreters of Scripture should be honest and acknowledge that God is portrayed as violent or commanding violence, rather than denying it: 'In short, violence is not the only model of behavior on offer in the Bible, but it is not an incidental or peripheral feature, and it cannot be glossed over. The Bible not only witnesses to the innocent victim and to the God of victims, but also to the hungry God who devours victims and to the zeal of his human agents.'[31] Trying to explain away God's involvement in

[30] Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures,* 112.
[31] Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas,' 19-20.

violence does not make God less violent. In addition, interpreters should understand that the Bible does not 'claim that the stories it tells are paradigms for human action in all times and places' and be warned against certitude, because 'certitude leads to violence. The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation.'[32]When dealing with the so-called 'texts of terror,' interpreters should make it clear that their interpretations are contextual, provisional, and revisable.

The choice by some biblical scholars to create a 'canon within the canon,' that is, to 'expect that not all writings are of theological significance for us today,' because not all the writings 'are of equal theological quality, and not all can equally express Christian revelation'[33] does not solve the problem of violence in Scripture but goes around it. Just repudiating some portions of the Bible or de-canonizing the Bible is not the best way to deal with the problem because that selective appropriation of the Bible simply hides the ugly part of the depictions of God, instead of confronting it. Another easy way-out is to abandon faith altogether because the images of God that one encounters in the Bible are not appealing. Both ways of dealing with divine violence in the Bible are not viable.

My approach to divine violence in the Old Testament takes seriously the canonical shape and status of the Old Testament as Scripture and the context of trauma within which I read those violent images of God. I assume that the Bible is a 'divine word that is uniquely powerful to interpret our experience,'[34] that it aims to tell us 'about the nature and will of God,' to instruct us 'in the manifold and often hidden ways in which God is present and active in our world,' and to give us 'a new awareness of ourselves and our actions,' showing us 'that in everything we have to do with God.'[35] I suggest therefore that we deal with the question of violence head-on, while holding onto the belief that the entire canonical biblical text is binding for our believing communities. It is precisely because the Bible

[32] Collins, 'The Zeal of Phinehas,' 20-21.
[33] Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone,* 39-40.
[34] Davis, 'Reading the Bible Confessionally in the Church,' 9; cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Dei Verbum*, no. 11–12.
[35] Davis, 'Reading the Bible Confessionally in the Church', 11.

is believed to be binding that its violence shocks and needs to be taken seriously. If we considered the Bible as a document that is only partially binding, we would have no problem excising some of its portions whenever those portions displeased us.

It is true that the image of God taking vengeance can be embarrassing for a believer. One might want to have a gentle, non-judgmental, neutral, and always merciful God, rather than the powerful, vengeful, irascible, and jealous God, who can use violence to punish and against whom no bully can stand. Modern studies of violence and trauma have shown us that overwhelming violence and chronic conflicts shatter individuals and communities to the point of instilling in them a feeling of helplessness and terror. Traumatized people lose faith in others, institutions, order, and God.[36] As David Hooker puts it, 'trauma occurs when circumstances are perceived as life-threatening or overwhelming to an individual's or a community's capacity to respond. The circumstance or event itself is not trauma. Trauma is the complex set of physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and relational responses to an experience of utter helplessness.'[37]

In such a context, where even God is suspected, the image of a God who does not stand up to and does not stop violence is less reassuring, because in traumatized communities, individuals are aware that neutrality keeps the status quo and maintains them in their conditions of devastation. The image of a violent God speaks more powerfully than those of patience, mercy, or love. When God is presented as vengeful, divine vengeance is not viewed as mere vindictiveness, but as protection for the weak and the enactment of justice and order. Because in such places people are on their own, without any institutional protection, knowing that there is a higher institution that holds the bullies accountable and that can take vengeance on behalf of the weak is reassuring. Sometimes the only image of God that makes sense is that of a God more violent than your oppressor. Indeed, if God cannot stop the oppressors/bullies, his patience can be equated with complicity in the suffering of the victims of unlimited violence. Thus, the majestic image of the vengeful, irascible, and jealous God of the book of

[36] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 7.
[37] Hooker, *The Little Book of Transformative Community Conferencing*, Kindle loc 277–79.

Nahum might perplex some readers, but it can reassure a traumatized reader that God can end any form of oppression, violence, or injustice.

It is more complicated to appropriate the image of a God commanding the extermination of the Canaanites in the book of Deuteronomy, because, in this passage, the Israelites who had been traumatized by Egyptian oppression are about to become perpetrators of violence. The persuasive explanations given by Davis and Chapman clarifies the purpose of the Deuteronomy text. However, because this text has often been used to justify violence against native nations, it is important, in traumatized communities, to own such a text and lament the image of God encountered therein. The command to exterminate the Canaanites can be repulsive, but it gives us an honest image of the complex relationship between God and human beings and of the world we inhabit. Unjustified violence and traumagenic events can sometimes make the victim feel like the entire world (even God) has set itself against her/him. When the *herem* (ban) instructions are read from the perspective of trauma, they can function as a window through which a traumatized person can interpret her/his own experience. Those instructions suggest that God can seem to be momentarily on the side of the oppressor against the victim. For people of faith, this same God who seems to side with the strong to the detriment of the weak is our Father, even though sometimes an embarrassing Father. When the Bible is read in faith, the traumatized reader can understand that, when one feels like God is implicated in the violence perpetrated against her/him, the solution is not to reject God or to discard parts of the Bible. Rejecting an embarrassing father is not the best solution for a son or a daughter. The biblical precedent for how to deal with God's apparently inimical behavior is the practice of vigorous protest and lament. God does not expect human beings simply to submit to his command to destroy others or to imitate his participation in violence. Indeed, God shows himself to favor argument/discussion to passive submissiveness. Even though God shows himself to take part in violence and to command violence, he nonetheless does not expect humans to imitate him or to simply watch him destroy others. On the contrary, God hopes to find, among the humans, one who can 'stand in the breach before Me on behalf of the land, that I might not destroy it' (Ezek 22: 30). In the Old Testament canon, Abraham is the first human person to be considered God's intimate (Gen 18: 19), and yet he is 'the first person in biblical history of the world

not only to appeal to God's justice but, further, to raise questions about it:'[38]

Would you really sweep away the innocent with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent people within the city, will you wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that the innocent and the guilty are alike. Far be it from you. Should not the judge of all the earth deal justly? (Gen 18: 23-25).

For Ellen Davis, God's statement that Abraham's is his intimate (his devoted friend), Abraham's bold but honest stance before God on behalf of Sodom, and his later readiness to offer his only son (Gen 22) 'show that Abraham's devotion to God is unconditional yet not uncritical.'[39] Daring to protest 'against the dubious counsels of God'[40] is an indispensable part of a life of intimacy with God. Abraham's doubt and questioning stem, not from merely adversarial sentiment, but from the trust and vulnerability that come with devotion between friends.

The book of Job is arguably the best response to the question of divinely instigated violence. In this book, God does not destroy Job but allows the Satan (the Adversary) to destroy him, in order for God to prove to the Satan that Job fears YHWH 'for no good reason' (Job 1: 9). Job has no idea that God and the Satan had a heavenly bargain about his fidelity to God but simply sees his world unraveling in front of him. Job loses everything: property, wealth, servants, children, and personal health. Every character in the book suspects that YHWH is somehow behind Job's suffering, but they do not agree on the reason for Job's suffering and on how to deal with that suffering. The book presents three options for dealing with what appears to be YHWH's adversarial behavior.

For the Satan and Job's wife, the normal reaction to divinely inflicted misery is to curse YHWH to his face (Job 1: 11; 2: 6, 9). Cursing YHWH to his face, according to Mrs. Job, leads inevitably to death. This solution

[38] Davis, *Biblical Prophecy,* 25.
[39] Davis, *Biblical Prophecy,* 26.
[40] Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil,* 151.

to misery means that the sufferer separates himself/herself from God and does not have to deal with the difficult question of why YHWH is allowing his/her suffering.

The second option is that of Job's friends. For them, God is not the culprit: it is Job who must amend his ways because God cannot be accused of perverting justice (Job 8:3). This stance suggests that misery be explained away because every suffering has a clear cause: human wrongdoing. That precludes protest or lament because every pain is deserved. When applied to the interpretation of God's violent images in the Bible, the friends' option would simply downplay the gravity of divine violence because the problem is always on the human side. In other words, if God is perceived as violent, it is because human readers misunderstand him. For this option, it is better 'to cover our confusion about God with a false piety'[41] than to take the risk of blaming God.

The third option is that of Job himself. Job knows that YHWH must be, in a certain way, implicated in his misery. He knows that it is to God that he must appeal, even though it is the same God who has become his enemy (19:21-22; 23:16; 27:1). Knowing that he is innocent, Job feels that the system is rigged against him, so he protests the perversion of justice in the world. For Ellen F. Davis, 'The divine Judge from whom Job expects acquittal is, of course, the same God whom he accuses of injustice. With a passion for justice instilled by God, he turns the prophetic demand for vindication of the righteous *against* God. Here is the acute paradox that lies at the heart of this book, and also the reason the church is afraid of it: Job rails against God, not as a sceptic, not as a stranger to God's justice, but precisely as a believer.'[42]

What I am suggesting here is that the character of Job in the book of Job shows us how to read difficult texts, how to deal with the unpalatable violent images of God that we encounter in Scripture. A God who commands the extermination of other nations is incomprehensible, but he is also 'Our Father from of old' (Isa 63: 16). False piety in front of this God is a lack of honesty; total rejection is a form of easy capitulation. Protesting

[41] Davis, *Getting Involved with God,* 133.
[42] Davis, *Getting Involved with God,* 133.

against the violent and angry God of Deuteronomy means refusing to go along with the divine command to destroy, while holding onto our intimate relationship with this embarrassing friend/father. This stance is not unbiblical because protesting against God, as we just showed it, is intrinsic to biblical faith.

Reading difficult texts is a prophetic task that requires honesty both about the Bible and about the conditions of the world we inhabit. Our context of traumatic violence and chronic conflicts requires that we stand 'mud-spattered (see Jer. 38:6) amid the ruins of life – not just individual life but the life of a people, one's own people – while speaking honestly to God and truthfully for God.'[43] Cover-up and resignation before the repulsive images of God of the Old Testament would not heal the wounds of the traumatized but would only cover them with more confusion and instability. In other words, speaking with genuine honesty about divine violence is the proper theological discourse amid traumatic violence. Job's model of speech about God (vigorous protest), over against that of his friends, his wife, or the Satan, proves to be the proper theological discourse. Job's response to God's violence serves as a good model for traumatized readers because Job speaks accurately about God (Job 42:7), with the authority of the one who knows the pain of being afflicted by God. As Davis says,

> … we learn that the person in pain is a theologian of unique authority. The sufferer who keeps looking for God has, in the end, privileged knowledge. The one who complains to God, pleads with God, rails at God, does not let God off the hook for a minute – she is at last admitted to a mystery. She passes through a door that only pain will open, and is thus qualified to speak of God in a way that others, whom we generally call more fortunate, cannot speak.[44]

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that Dawkins can be right to note that the God of the Old Testament is the most unpleasant character of all fiction because Dawkins approaches God, not as a believer, but as a skeptical stranger.

[43] Davis, *Biblical Prophecy,* 144-45.
[44] Davis, *Getting Involved with God,* 122.

Getting involved with the violent God of the Old Testament requires faith because one can approach this unsettling God[45] only with faith, hope, and charity. Violence, whether it is divine or human, is despicable. However, in traumatized communities, not having God and his moral authority would allow for lawlessness and the domination of the bullies.

This discussion on God's involvement in violence in the Old Testament has shown us that, in black African traumatized communities, divine violence and divinely instigated violence should not be easily repudiated. Indeed, sometimes, believers need images of a violent God to reassure them of the existence of order and justice in the world. In addition, we have shown that the proper theological discourse for a traumatized believer who is shocked by the images of divine violence in the Old Testament is neither cover-up nor resignation, but vigorous protest and lament.

[45] The expression 'unsettling God' is the title of a book by Walter Brueggemann, in which he analyzes the dialogical character of God in the Old Testament. See Bruggemann, Walter. *The Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.