

# Review

**Title:** *Light Through The Darkness: A Vindication of God*

**Author:** Marilyn Madison Campbell

**Reviewer:** Gregory Boyd

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## Shedding Light On “The Dark Side of God” [Former Title]

Is it possible to believe that the whole Bible is divinely inspired and yet believe that God never engages in violence? Any one with even a cursory knowledge of the Bible would probably answer this with a resounding “No.” The Bible attributes a good deal of violence to God. He sent the flood, had the Canaanites slaughtered, slaughtered the first born son of every Egyptian family, opened up the earth to swallow up a bunch of rebellious Israelites and sends people to hell — to name just a few of Yahweh’s exploits mentioned in the Bible.

But *what if* (try to keep an open mind) when the Bible says God did these things it didn’t mean he actually did them, only that he *allowed them* and accepts responsibility for them? It’s not as ludicrous as it might initially sound. I’ve been toying with this idea for several years, recognizing that in Ancient Near Eastern cultures activities could be ascribed to kings and officials whenever anyone under their authority did something. Given that the Old Testament’s central concern is to proclaim Yahweh to be the one sole King and Ruler of the universe — in contrast to Israel’s neighbors who all believed in many gods — it makes sense to wonder how much of this near eastern monarchical language is in play. And I’ve wondered how far this idea could be pushed to help reconcile the God revealed in Jesus Christ with the God that seems to be revealed in the many violent episodes of the Bible.

Well, I just finished a book that pushes this idea *all* the way (though the author unfortunately didn’t know the Ancient Near Eastern custom I just referred to). The book is called *Light on the Dark Side of God* by Marilyn Madison Campbell. (The book was referred to me months ago by a blogger whose name I can’t now recall – but thank you for the reference).

Now, I’ll say up front that this book is not at all a scholarly book. It doesn’t interact with any historical-critical scholarship, jumps quite randomly all over the place, relies on a

rather naïve prooftexting methodology and gets involved in a number of irrelevant tangents – including way too much end times speculation for my taste. Yet, Campbell makes a surprisingly strong case for her thesis that all passages that ascribe destructive acts to God can be interpreted as God withdrawing his hand of protection over people or nations and allowing evil agents – human or angelic – to have their way with them.

Her starting point, quite rightly, is Jesus Christ. Jesus reveals what God is really like. He loves his enemies to the point of dying for them. He *doesn't kill them*. Given this fundamental axiom, Campbell searches for another way of understanding texts that attribute violence to God.

A key passage Campbell comes back to a number of times is Exodus 12 in which the Lord says he will strike down the firstborn of every family that does not have blood upon its doorposts (vs 12) but then goes on to say that the Lord “will not allow the destroyer” to kill the firstborn if blood is on the doorpost. Historical critical scholars argue that the “discrepancy” is due to the splicing together of two different traditions, but this sort of scholarly argumentation has rarely impressed me because it presupposes that the redactor (the person who spliced the traditions) was too dumb to notice a “discrepancy” that is obvious to later (and smarter?) scholars. If we reject this approach (Campbell is unaware of it), then it seems we're forced to the conclusion that God takes responsibility for something he doesn't directly do. God justly judges the Egyptians by withdrawing his protection from them, allowing “the destroyer” to do what he/it wants to do – kill. The Psalmist perhaps confirms this when he describes God's judgment on the Egyptians as a matter of God allowing a “band of destroying angels” to have their way with them (Psl. 78:49) even as it says that “*He* struck down the firstborn of Egypt” (78:51, emphasis added).

It may seem like God is still an accomplice to destructive suffering if he is ultimately the one who allows evil agents to do what they want to do, but Campbell suggests a way to understand this in which he's not. Think of evil as gravity and God as the one who keeps us from falling by hanging onto us. When we sin, we reject God's saving grasp. God in his mercy continues to hang on, but if we persist, there comes a point where it's no longer possible or wise, for whatever reasons, for God to continue holding on: so he withdraws his hand and we fall.

As Campbell shows, the Bible speaks this way about judgment *a lot*. For example, regarding the Romans Paul says, “God *gave them over* to shameful lusts” and “God withdrew his protection and *gave them over* to a depraved mind” (Rom. 1:26, 28, emphasis added). As in the days of Noah, God brought an end to his striving with humans and withdrew his Spirit, letting the Romans do what they wanted to do (Gen. 6 :3). God's judgment, Campbell tirelessly reiterates, is his withdrawing or his “hiding” (see e.g. Psl 27:9; 89:46).

Along the same lines, very frequently in the Bible when God judges a nation he does so by withdrawing his hand of protection and letting other nations carry out their evil intentions. So the Lord declares “Woe” to any nation “when I depart from them!” (Hos.

9:12). Yet, most of these passages also describe God *as though he was himself inflicting the pain*.

For example, Jeremiah says that “Lord is like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel,” and “multiplied mourning and Lamentation” (Lam. 2:5). But God does so by withdrawing from his alter, abandoning his sanctuary, and giving “the walls of her palaces into the hands of the enemy” (Lam. 2:7). So too, the Lord says he was to going to “bring a sword upon [Israel],” but he explains in the next phrase that he was planning on delivering Israel “into the hands of strangers, and execute judgments on you” (Ezek. 11;8-9). When Israel rejects God to a certain point, they forfeit his protecting hand and evil (like gravity) pulls them into pain and woe, sometimes using Assyria, or Babylon, or Egypt to do the pulling. Yet, God takes personal responsibility for these judgments to the point of saying he is the one inflicting the pain and destruction – despite the fact that God then sometimes gets angry with the nations inflicting the judgment because they go beyond what he intended (Isa 10:5; Zech. 1:15)! God takes responsibility even for things he doesn’t approve of.

For Campbell, this way of talking explains many passages that might otherwise seem contradictory. The author of 2 Samuel says the Lord moved David to number his soldiers (2 Sam. 24:2) but the author of Chronicles says it was Satan (1 Chron. 21:1). In 1 Chronicles 10 we’re told both that God killed Saul and that Saul killed himself (1 Chron. 10:4, 6, 14). Satan afflicted Job when God withdrew his “hedge” of protection around him (Job 1:10, 12; 2:6), and yet the author says his brothers and sisters consoled him for “all the trouble the Lord had brought on him” (42:11). Most importantly, Isaiah 53:4 prophecies that God will smite Jesus, yet the New Testament makes it clear that it was Satan, using willing human subjects, who orchestrated his crucifixion (1 Cor. 2:8). God withdrew from his Son and allowed Satan and evil human subjects to carry out their evil designs (which, of course, fit in perfectly with God’s good designs, Acts 2:23; 4:28). For Campbell, this explains why Jesus experienced God-forsakenness on the cross (Mark 15:34). So too, when God withdraws his protecting hand, Satan has his way in causing David to sin; Saul (perhaps influenced by evil spirits) has his way in killing himself, and Satan has his way in tormenting Job and his family.

Campbell also argues that when God “sent the flood, this was simply a matter of God withdrawing his providential hand and letting nature revert back toward its pre-creational state of chaos (Gen. 1:2). And when God called down fire to incinerate Sodom and Gomorrah, this was simply a matter of God withdrawing his protecting hand and allowing Satan and/or natural disasters to consume this city. Many other examples could be given, but you get the point.

Finally, Campbell admirably takes on the bothersome “holy war” tradition. It’s not her strongest section, but her straight forward approach is admirable nonetheless. She argues, with some force, that God did not originally want Israel to go to war with the Canaanites (see Exodus 13:17; Deuteronomy 1:30-32). He rather intended to relocate the Canaanites slowly, and non-violently, by using hornets and perhaps other natural means (Ex. 23:27-30). This is why he repeatedly reminded his people – even after they settled in the land – that he had no need for their swords (e.g. Joshua 24:11,12; Psalm 44:3; Ezekiel 33:26).

When they later wanted a king to lead them to war, just like the other nations, God said this was a matter of them *rejecting him* (I Sam. 8). Yet, God (reluctantly) worked with Israel's kingship – and he (reluctantly) worked with their military (even before they had a king). In Campbell's view, therefore, all the violence brought about by the conquest was a matter of God reluctantly acquiescing to the rebellious violence of his people while making the best of a bad situation.

I'm not saying I agree with all this. I've been wrestling with this concept for several years and suspect I will for several more before I land with both feet on the ground. But, for all its oddities, Campbell's book helped me along in this process, and for this I'm thankful.

### Author's Response

I can't say how much I appreciate Gregg Boyd's review, in spite of the fact that there were things in it that Mr. Boyd found "odd." I thought perhaps I should take a few moments to address these "oddities," even while recognizing that everyone has the right to his own opinion. While I have no doubt that there are flaws—that many suggestions could be made that would improve it—as attested by the numerous reviews, many who have read it thought it was well-written. And Boyd had much to say that was positive about my main point—that the church has overlooked something very important in Scripture. God does not destroy. He improves whatever He touches. And for Boyd's airing of that view I will ever be grateful.

But what about the "tangents." Were they really tangents? It is my belief that the doctrines of the gospel present a unified picture of Christ. They are not stand-alone, separate ideas that conflict and confuse, but, ideally, they stand together to contribute to our understanding of the true picture of God. The importance of obedience, the human condition in death, all play a part in seeing God as He is—something extremely important to Him, if we are to believe the Bible. For example, including the Scriptural view of death made it possible to show that God exerts His energy *to maintain life*—not to take it. Some of those miscellaneous doctrines, taken as is, are the nth degree of selfishness, a fact that seems lost on believers (but not lost on those outside the Christian fold). How about the doctrine that it is impossible to obey God; therefore, leaning on His righteousness we can sin all we want, because His righteousness covers us. What about the view that He's going to rapture His own children, and then turn the tribulation loose on this earth. How does it make God look, if He is not only going to burn His lost children, but He's going to burn them forever? No, what the church needs is a fully integrated picture of God based on a thorough understanding of the Bible and a correct body of doctrine. Where the picture doesn't come together, that is our call, as His children, to keep studying until it does. Rather than write several books to convey this, I put it in one book.

Further, I wish Boyd had seen the importance to my thesis of those references to the "end of days." If this view says anything important, it is that these principles apply to us;

they set the boundaries within which God can operate to save us. What will we do, when God is obliged to let us go? What will be the result on Planet Earth?

About “proof texting,” perhaps I am guilty of this, but how else can I support my thesis? Please understand that because it was impossible to pull in the whole text of Scripture, I was left with giving to my readers just enough to make them desire to read the Bible for themselves. Perhaps my references to God’s going away, coupled with those texts that refer to His anger and wrath will attest to my broad knowledge of Scripture. At the risk of appearing to boast, I have read Scripture cover to cover as many times as I have Bibles (and I have a lot of Bibles).

That God does not destroy has been believed for many years by many people. But largely it was an act of faith. They couldn’t quite bring it together. They could not believe that God, who gave His Son to die for our sins—an act requiring a lot of love and compassion and mercy—would be as vengeful as the Bible says. There had to be another option. Some even got it right, though they could not say why (or proof text their way to vindication). *Light Through the Darkness* does what few others could do; it gives the Biblical reasons for believing in a nondestructive God. All I have done is organize the idea and set it out in black and white. I don’t believe this could be done without having a good comprehension of the whole idea from Genesis to Revelation.

And then there was the need to keep it short so as not to exhaust the reader. All these factors entered into the writing of *Light Through the Darkness: A Vindication of God*, and made it what it is.

Up to now, if we wanted to believe in a nondestructive God, we were pretty much limited to the teachings of universalism, which didn’t seem right, either. After all, universalism cannot account for the many episodes of destructive activity attributed to God in Scripture. No. There had to be another way. The paradigm set out in *Light Through the Darkness* explains that while God holds us securely in His great arms of love, we are safe. But when we indulge in sin there comes a time when God can no longer protect us. When He lets us go, it is the sorriest day of our lives.

Thank you, Gregory Boyd, for “getting it.”

Marilyn Madison Campbell  
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