

Boyd, Gregory A. *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997.

Introduction

Formerly a professor of theology at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, Gregory Boyd now serves as the senior pastor of Woodland Hills Baptist Church in St. Paul. A gifted writer and apologist, Boyd is one of the strongest voices supporting Open Theism. He has authored many books including *Letters from a Skeptic*, a collection of apologetic letters to his father eventually lead him to Christ; *Cynic, Sage, or Son of God? Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies*, a response to the Jesus Seminar; and *God of the Possible*, a systematic explanation for his understanding of Open Theism. With this “Open” understanding of the future, where God cannot know yet what free-will beings are going to do, Boyd writes *God at War* to address the problems of sin, evil, and Satan in the cosmos.

As to be expected his heterodox view of God’s sovereignty leads to some disputable conclusions, yet his scholarship and attention to biblical detail bring about many keen observations helpful for understanding spiritual warfare and the real battle that exists in the universe between God and his many foes. What follows is a response to some of the ideas posited in his book, namely to the idea that world was restored in Genesis 1-2 and not created (see pp. 100-112).

Critical Evaluation

Challenging the traditional models of God’s sovereignty, Boyd articulates an understanding of the Bible and the world around us that is full of spiritual activity. He shows

God to be the supreme being in a world filled with angels, demons, and humans all battling for dominion. His open theism permeates his explanations. On the one hand, this provides helpful questions, considerations, and problems that stodgy reformers would not raise against the Bible; on the other, the solutions he gives to biblical problems overturn years of Biblical exposition, and in many cases cause more theological problems than they solve.

His views are consistent in that he weaves a storyline from pre-creation to the cross to the end of all things. He supposes that all of the Bible portrays a fight between God (through his *imago dei*) and the forces of evil in the created world. Looking at the Old Testament in the first half of his book, Boyd seeks to prove the existence and emerging understanding of evil within ancient Israel. Following this section, he analyzes the New Testament and spiritual warfare elements within Jesus ministry and teaching. In the end, Boyd seeks to prove that spiritual warfare and conflict with evil are both existent in the Old Testament and commended in the New Testament. Thus he concludes with a chapter on the warfare of the believer called “Engaging the Powers: The Christian Life as Spiritual Warfare.” Here he writes, “there are still important [spiritual] battles to be fought. Fighting them is what the Christian life is all about” (291).

With this conclusion I agree. The Bible is filled with warfare language. YHWH is a warrior (Ex. 15:3); Jesus is a victorious king (Rev. 19:11-16). This conclusion is not what I want to contest. Rather, long before Boyd draws any conclusions in his final chapter, he posits an understanding of the universe to ground his warfare worldview.

Beginning on page 100 Boyd takes the reader back to the beginning of creation and beyond. His aim is to ascertain the beginning of evil and its deleterious effects on mankind. “If the all-powerful Creator is perfectly good but creation is largely evil,” posits Boyd, “something must have interfered with the creation...If evil will have an end, it must have had a beginning,

hence it is not coeternal with God” (102). Here Boyd discloses his pursuit to discover the origin of evil in opening pages of Genesis.

In typical form, Boyd wants to “step back from the traditional reading of Genesis 1” (102-103). Following this trajectory away from the consensus view of Genesis’ creation account, Boyd introduces the “Gap” or “restoration” theory of Genesis 1:2 (104). He rattles off six reasons supporting this view of Genesis 1:2, before concluding:

The restoration theory is part of a cosmic warfare background against which the cosmic dimension of humanity’s purpose, nightmarish evil, and Christ’s coming, death and resurrection begin to make sense... From start to finish, this inspired literary collection is about God restoring his creation through humanity... and destroying his cosmic opponents in the process.

This obviously runs in contradistinction with the normative understanding of Genesis 1, where God’s world is created “very good” and is ruined by the fall of man. To the contrary, Boyd makes these six days of creation, days of restoration instead. Yet, as the name Genesis suggests this etiological account should be read as the creation of the heavens and the earth and not restoration of a world fallen in cosmic chaos.

Boyd’s first argument for understanding Genesis 1 as a restoration of a fallen world is that this reading of the text best comports with the cosmic warfare worldview of the Bible. While conceding his point that the warfare motif is biblical, Genesis 3 seems to be an explicit description of the world’s fallenness, and thus a better explanation for the world’s condition. Boyd builds his argument on silence, and consequently inserts a great deal of meaning into the period ending Genesis 1:1.

Boyd, too, explains humanity’s role in terms of warfare worldview. He quotes Eric Sauer as saying, “our ‘appointed vocation in paradise consisted in the winning back of the earth for God and to restore the whole earth’” (107). While kingdom language seems present in

Genesis 1, humanities *telos* does not seem to be restoration of a fallen world because under God's assessment in Genesis 1 the world is "good."

Man's responsibility was to "fill" and "subdue" the earth, having "dominion" over it (Gen. 1:28). Boyd takes "subdue" to mean restore, to "[carry] on God's creational work of bringing order to chaos" (106). Yet, Boyd's understanding of cosmic chaos seems premature. Nowhere in Genesis 1-2 is there an explicit hint of disturbance by evil forces. Though God gives a command for obedience, this does not connote evil's presence as much as the design of the universe.

Still, Boyd imports meaning into Genesis 1 by assigning "subdue" (Gen. 1:28) with the meaning of "enslavement of hostile forces" (106). Yet, based on the surrounding context, this reading does not seem appropriate. Rather, it would be better to explain man's subjugation of the earth with what is said in Genesis 2:15 (another passage describing man's pre-fall mission). It reads, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden to work it and keep it." Man was to be the divinely appointed steward of the garden, and in this way he was to subdue all of creation. Boyd fails to see the cataclysmic effect of the fall, and evil's absence before this event.

This leads to another source of contention with Boyd, and that is his understanding of the fall. He writes, "Our fall cannot explain the cosmic fall, but the fall of cosmic wills can help explain our fall" (109). This is a very disagreeable position. God's curse is what set humanity at odds with one another, and what caused the creation to groan (Rom. 8:19-22). When God set enmity between rival seeds he announced the forthcoming war that would exist for all of history between his children and the devil's. If ever someone needs an explanation for the material and spiritual warfare of this world Genesis 3:14-19 is the text to cite.

Yet, all of these arguments are based upon the presupposition drawn from Genesis 1 that when God created the world he created it “good” and “very good.” Boyd mocks as he twice describes the world in which man was brought into as an “infected incubator” (107, 110), for God’s holy word describes the world as “very good” (Genesis 1:31). This is far different than an “infected incubator.” Describing the Genesis as such a place fits his schema, but it just does not harmonize with the Bible. The magnitude of the fall is magnified by the preceding goodness. Boyd’s interpretation, on the other hand, defames God’s creation and his character.

Finally, after discoursing for more than 10 pages, Boyd relaxes his position. He says, “while the case for the restoration view is defensible and compelling, the evidence is nevertheless admittedly tentative and controversial and should not be raised to the level of doctrine (113).” Yet, Boyd clearly builds his argument on this understanding. To come back and question its validity after explaining it so thoroughly seems very suspect. If nothing else this makes the reader pause and consider whether or not Boyd is allowing Scripture to speak for itself, or if he is rearranging the Scriptures to prove his argument.

Conclusion

Overall, *God at War* raises many issues worthy of consideration. His assertion for understanding the world through a warfare lens is helpful, and I think accurate. This attention to warfare should not only be considered in the daily life of Christians, but also in understanding the last things. Though, this paper has reflected on the origins of creation. It is those exact origins that give shape to understanding the final destination of God’s world. This is why getting the beginning right is so important. Genesis is more than just an etiological account. It is a pattern for things to come. So it must be maintained that God created the world good, that it was

ruined by sin, that Christ came to restore that shattered order, and that he is coming again to defeat sin and death.

As believers, we must affirm these things and hold onto the orthodox views not only of theological systems, but also of Biblical passages. We must not be swept away by vain speculations, and thus we must biblically consider and contest teachings like Gregory Boyd's on the origination of humanity and the earth. Let us speak about what the Bible declares, and let us be silent where the Bible is intentionally speechless.