The Old Testament Sanction of War

Summary of major points

A. The Problem
1. The Old Testament is full of violence whereas the New Testament is remarkably free of violence.
2. There is an apparent conflict between the two testaments since God commands his people to kill in the Old Testament but commands his followers to “love their enemies” and “pray for those who persecute you” in the New Testament.
3. The Old Testament describes mass killings committed in the name of God
4. Three OT heroes of faith, Moses, David and Elijah engage in violent acts including killing
5. Even in the Psalms we find the Psalmist petitioning God to exact revenge, kill his enemies and destroy those who threaten him

In summary, the Old Testament does not seem to characterize the gentleness, mercy, and love of enemies that the New Testament emphasizes.

B. Proposed Solutions
1. Marcion, a first century Gnostic Christian argued that it is quite easy to resolve this apparent conflict between the two testaments, clearly there are two different Gods. The OT god is cruel and vengeful whereas the NT god is loving, merciful and forgiving. Marcion’s views were rejected as heretical and he was excommunicated from the church.
2. The wars of the OT were HOLY WARS based on the covenant that God had made with his people. God had promised his people protection and a land if they would follow him and be obedient to him. More than simple obedience, God had a specific plan for Israel; they were to be the means whereby God would reveal Himself to the nations. It would not be primarily through war that Israel’s neighbours would come to a knowledge of Yahweh, but through Israel’s faithful obedience to God as a “suffering servant” (Isaiah 42: 1-7; 44:28)
3. Another possibility would be to see the New Testament as a fulfillment of the OT. God’s will is progressively revealed in the Bible. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus did not tell his disciples to break the law, since he had come to fulfill the law. Christ came to bring a deeper meaning of the law. In the OT adultery was wrong whereas in the NT even thinking about is forbidden. In the OT it was common to think of loving one’s neighbours and hating one’s enemies. Jesus taught us that we need to show love especially to our enemies.

C. Conclusions
1. OT wars cannot and should not be used to justify Christian participation in war. Many OT practices simply cannot be viewed as normative for the Christian such as owning slaves, killing animals as sacrifices, stoning adulterers etc. It is the foolishness of the cross not the power of an army that overcomes the forces of evil.
2. God is the author of life; he has power over life and death.
3. We are called to be obedient to God and today that means faithful obedience to God’s revelation in Jesus. We need to proclaim the forgiveness and love that Jesus offers and refrain from taking human life.