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## The Elephant

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,  
flicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic,  
capriciously malevolent bully.  
—Richard Dawkins<sup>1</sup>

Sixteen years into our marriage, Shelley and I had to name the proverbial elephant that was in the room of our relationship. And it was an *ugly* elephant! A void had grown between us almost from the start of our marriage. We loved each other and loved our three children, and we got along reasonably well and had memorable times together. But Shelley and I are wired about as differently as two people can be. Because of this, we never found a way to get deeply inside each other's heart and mind, and at some point rather early on in our marriage, we gave up trying. Consequently, as the years rolled on, we both increasingly felt alone in our marriage. At the core of our being—our soul—we didn't feel fully known, loved, or appreciated by the other.

For the first sixteen years of our marriage, the business of raising three children, finishing grad school, supporting the family, engaging in ministry, and everything else that life requires made it pretty easy to suppress our inner pain and ignore the growing gulf. But our kids

1. R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 31.

were growing older, and we each had begun to wonder what our life together would look like without the children in the home.

The elephant became impossible to ignore. We had to finally get real with the fact that we felt like aliens to one another.

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Acknowledging the elephant unleashed sixteen years' worth of suppressed loneliness, resentment, and pain, and the ensuing six months were, frankly, pure hell. Only our commitment before God to stay married "for better or for worse" kept us in the game. And truth be told, even that was at times stretched almost to the breaking point.

Thankfully, with the help of some excellent counseling, something beautiful began to emerge out of this hell, and it has continued ever since. It took a lot of work, but Shelley and I slowly discovered ways of getting into each other's alien inner worlds. And by doing so, we discovered a profound mutual love and friendship we previously never dreamed was possible.

This scary, painful, but transformative period of our marriage illustrates an important truth: The only way to discover the beauty that lies on the other side of a mountain of ugliness is to courageously confront and work through it.

## Calling It What It Is

Brothers and sisters who follow Jesus, we have an elephant in our room. We believe that God is altogether beautiful, loving, compassionate, and just. And this belief is well founded, for this is how the Bible generally portrays God. Most importantly, this is the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. What we tend to ignore, however, is that there are some portraits of God in the OT, which we rightly confess to be "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16), that are most definitely *not* beautiful, loving, compassionate, or just.

In fact, though it may sound irreverent to say it, some portraits of God in the OT are, quite frankly, *really ugly!* How else can you honestly describe a depiction of God, for example, ordering his people to mercilessly annihilate every member of the Midianites except for the virgin girls, whom Israelite soldiers were allowed to keep alive to enjoy as spoils of war (Num 31:1–17)?

Suppose you came upon a depiction of a god like this while

reading an ancient pagan religious text. Would you hesitate to call it ugly? Of course not. But isn't it disingenuous to refrain from calling this same depiction "ugly" simply because it's found in *your* holy book rather than in someone else's?

At the same time, admitting that a biblical depiction of God is ugly seems to conflict with the Christian belief that God is beautiful and that everything in the Bible is divinely inspired. So, not knowing what else to do, most Christians go on professing that God is beautiful while trying to ignore the biblical depictions of God that are ugly. Whether we do it consciously or not, we subject the OT to a "textual cleansing" in order to create "an acceptable Bible Lite" for ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

This is not a helpful strategy. Among other things, even if we rarely think about them, Scripture's violent portraits of God will continue to pollute our mental images of God until we find a way to reconcile them with Jesus's supreme revelation of God. And the thing about polluted mental images of God is that they inevitably compromise the vibrancy of our relationship with God, which in turn compromises the passion with which we live out our faith in God.

On top of this, numerous studies have shown that violent depictions of God in literature that is regarded as sacred make believers more inclined toward violence.<sup>3</sup> Given the rising fear surrounding religiously motivated violence since 9/11, this makes many people understandably concerned about the OT's violent representations of God.

These divine portraits also give plenty of ammunition to critics of the Bible, and I have met far too many former Christians, and even former pastors, whose faith was destroyed because they found they could no longer defend these ugly portraits against these critics.<sup>4</sup>

The time for us to name the large and very ugly elephant in our

2. P. Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 15.
3. M. Beier, *A Violent God-Image: An Introduction to the Work of Eugen Drewermann* (New York: Continuum, 2004); D. Daschke and A. Kille, eds., *A Cry Instead of Justice: The Bible and Cultures of Violence in Psychological Perspective* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010); R. S. Hess and E. A. Martens, eds., *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), and Jenkins, *op. cit.*
4. See Dawkins, *God Delusion*; C. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2009); D. Barker, *God, the Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction* (New York: Sterling, 2016). It's worth noting that Dan Barker, the author of this last book, was a Christian evangelist for sixteen years before losing his faith and becoming an atheist. And one of the main reasons is that he concluded there was no way to defend the immoral character of God in many narratives of the OT.

room is long past due. We have to honestly deal with the awful violence that some OT authors ascribe to God.<sup>5</sup>

## The Book I Couldn't Write

Ten years ago I set out to write a book that attempted to tackle the OT's violent portraits of God. Like other Evangelical books on this topic, my plan was to put forth the best arguments I had accumulated over the years that attempt to justify the violence of God in the OT.

After writing about fifty pages, I had to quit. My arguments frankly struck me as woefully inadequate. Even if they succeeded in justifying the violence that God commanded or enacted—which they usually didn't—none of them came close to showing how these portraits were compatible with Jesus's cross-centered revelation of God.

Even more problematic, however, was that I had come to understand that, according to Jesus, all Scripture is supposed to *point to* him, and especially to his sacrificial suffering on the cross.<sup>6</sup> While my best explanations might make the violently behaving God of the OT look a little less nasty, and perhaps sometimes even ethical, they did absolutely nothing to show how these violent divine portraits *point to Christ crucified*.

Admitting that I could no longer justify the OT's violent portraits of God put me in a serious dilemma. On the authority of Jesus, I had to affirm that the whole OT is divinely inspired. But also on the authority of Jesus, I could no longer accept the violence that some narratives within this divinely inspired book ascribe to God.

I struggled with this inner conflict for several months. But then something unexpected and wonderful began to happen. I actually began to see how even the most offensively violent portraits of God in the OT reflect and point toward the self-sacrificial and nonviolent character of God that is revealed on the cross.

Most surprisingly of all, I found that the thing that enabled me to see this was that I was *no longer trying to justify these offensive pictures!* As paradoxical as it sounds, it was only by acknowledging that the

5. I should note that some allege that the NT also contains violent portraits of God. I have not addressed these allegations in this book because, in my opinion, others have already adequately accomplished this. Two excellent examples are T. Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Enmity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) and M. Strauss, *Jesus Behaving Badly* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015).

6. John 5:38–40, 45–47; Luke 24:25–27, 45–46; cf. 1 Cor 15:3. We will discuss this in depth in the following chapter.

violent portraits of God in the OT were *not* compatible with the God who is fully revealed on the cross that I came to see how these portraits actually *point to* the God who is fully revealed on the cross!

Well, this set me off on a ten-year reading and writing adventure that resulted in a highly academic, two-volume, 1445-page book called *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, few nonacademics are going to try to tackle a book like that, which is why this much more reasonably sized book was written.

But it all began when I stopped trying to justify the violence that some OT authors ascribe to God while continuing to believe that all Scripture, including its most violent portraits of God, are divinely inspired for the ultimate purpose of pointing people to the crucified Christ, who is the very “life” of Scripture (John 5:38–47).

### Embracing the Problem

For this reason, readers should be forewarned that I am not going to try to minimize the moral awfulness or put the best possible spin on the OT’s violent depictions of God, as Evangelical apologists typically do.<sup>8</sup> If a biblical author ascribes an action to God that we would normally consider morally awful, I will not hesitate to admit that the action is, in fact, morally awful.

Taking a ruthlessly honest look at this material is going to create some cognitive dissonance in the minds of some readers, for it will challenge assumptions about what it means to confess that all Scripture is divinely inspired, or, as Paul puts it, “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). The first step in this journey is to suspend this concern and simply embrace whatever inner conflict you experience as we review this material. We have to honestly confront and work through this mountain of ugliness if we are to eventually find the beauty on the other side.

Remember, God is not offended or angry with our questions. The major heroes of faith in the Bible were brutally honest in voicing

7. Gregory Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). I will frequently refer readers who are interested in my sources and/or who want a more scholarly and extensive treatment of a given topic to this work, which I will henceforth abbreviate as *CWG*.

8. H. Wettstein, “God’s Struggles,” in M. Bergmann, M. J. Murray, and M. C. Rea, eds., *Divine Evil?: The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 321–33 (322).

objections to God when it seemed that God was acting out of character.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Lord changed Jacob's name to "Israel" precisely because he was willing to wrestle with God (Gen 32:24–32)! So, honestly wrestling with God actually lies at the foundation of the Bible's understanding of faith. As I have argued elsewhere, not only is God not offended or angered by our honest questioning, God applauds it!<sup>10</sup>

Bearing this in mind, let's go to the mat.

### **Genocidal Worship<sup>11</sup>**

It's a few thousand years ago. A young Canaanite couple is enjoying an afternoon with their newborn infant. Like everybody else in their small town, this couple has heard rumors of a warring nomadic tribe called the Hebrews who worshiped a mighty warrior god named Yahweh. But the people of their town had prayed and made sacrifices to their chief god, Baal. And since Baal had protected them from other warring tribes and deities in the past, they had hope that the Hebrews would not attack their town.

On this day, however, their prayers and sacrifices prove futile. This couple hears the battle horns and war cries of an approaching army. They see and hear neighbors screaming and frantically running down the dirt path outside their tiny hut. Their hearts pound as they stare at each other for a brief bewildered and terrified moment. Suddenly realizing what is taking place, the teenage mother sweeps up her newborn, the husband grabs his sword, and they turn to run out the door.

Unfortunately, they're too late. Before they reach the door, two sword-wielding Hebrew soldiers appear before them screaming, "Praise Yahweh! Yahweh is great!" The terrified husband raises his weapon, but the soldiers quickly run their swords through him. Seeing the hopelessness of her situation, the petrified mother curls up in

9. Look, for example, at the honest objections and complaints to God raised by Abraham (Gen 18:23–33), Moses (Exod 32:9–14; 33:12–16), the psalmist (Ps 89:19–44), Habakkuk (Hab 1:3–4, 13), and, of course, Job (Job 9:17, 22–24; 10:3, 8, 16–20; 16:12–14; 24:12).

10. See G. Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 75–90. In this book I share the story of how I learned that getting raw with God can open us up to receive more insightful revelations from God (see *ibid.*, 91–111).

11. For a more comprehensive and in-depth review of the OT's violent portraits of God, see *CWG*, vol. 1, ch. 6.

the corner of her hut, crying and shaking as she clutches her wailing infant.

As the two Hebrew soldiers approach her with their bloodied swords raised above their heads, she holds up her baby, begging the soldiers to at least have mercy on her infant. One of the soldiers is moved and hesitates for a moment as he thinks about his own young wife and newborn daughter. His comrade notices his hesitation and reminds him that Yahweh had specifically commanded Moses to have his people worship him by *showing no mercy* toward anyone or anything. “The mother and baby must also be offered up to Yahweh,” he says.

The first soldier reluctantly nods his head, closes his eye, and shouts, “Praise be to Yahweh!” as he puts his full weight and strength into his falling sword. Both soldiers are splattered with blood as the sword splits the young mother’s skull. The other soldier then shouts the same praise as he bludgeons the crying infant to death.

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When you imagine this story, how does it make you feel? The revulsion I experienced when I first vividly imagined this scene was one of the factors that caused me to abandon any hope or desire that I had to justify violent portraits of God such and this one. For, as disturbing as it is, this fictionalized story represents the biblical account of what took place thousands and thousands of times when Israel invaded the land of Canaan.

Scripture says that Yahweh told Moses to destroy the lands’ inhabitants totally, adding that the Israelites were to “make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy” (Deut 7:2–3). At another point Yahweh is depicted as telling Moses:

In the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you. (Deut 20:16–17)

We find variations of this frightful command being given or carried out *thirty-seven times* in the OT!<sup>12</sup>

12. See the informative table of the “Most Disturbing Conquest Texts” in Jenkins, *ibid.*, 36–39. For an excellent overview of the brutality of the conquest narrative, see *ibid.*, 29–47.

What makes these commands even more horrific is that the Hebrew word for “total destruction” is *hērem*, meaning to “set apart” or “devote” to Yahweh a people group “for destruction.” In other words, when the Israelites engaged in wholesale genocide against various populations, they believed they were doing it as an *act of devotion to Yahweh*.

If our wrestling with these disturbing divine portraits is to be authentic, we must allow their gruesome character to affect us. We need to concretely imagine the *hērem* command being carried out on mothers with their children and newborn babies. And we need to do the same with the multitude of other horrifically violent portraits of God in the OT.

### **Other Accounts of God Commanding Violence**

Moses came down from Mount Sinai just after he had received the Ten Commandments. During the forty days he was gone, the children of Israel had fallen into idolatry. Yahweh is depicted as telling Moses to have each of the Levites “strap a sword to his side.” Then they were to “go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor” (Exod 32:27).

The Levites obeyed Moses, with the result that “about three thousand” people were slain (v.28). Moses then congratulated the Levites for doing such a thorough job while reminding them that the people they had slaughtered had been “set . . . apart to the Lord” (v.29). In other words, as with the *hērem* command, Moses understood this bloodbath to be an act of worship.

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Other things that Moses believed Yahweh had told him to do are no less disturbing. For example, at one point Scripture reports that Yahweh told Moses to send out troops to “take vengeance” upon the Midianites, as I mentioned above (Num 31:1–3). The Israelites obeyed Moses and proceeded to slaughter every Midianite man and burn all the Midianites’ cities to the ground (vv. 7, 10). However, the soldiers “captured the Midianite women and children and took all the Midianite herds, flocks and goods as plunder” (v. 9).

That was apparently a bad idea. When Moses found out that his

troops had shown mercy on the noncombatants, he was furious (v. 15). Apparently still believing he was following Yahweh's command, Moses instructed his warriors to "kill all the boys" as well as all the women who were not virgins. However, he permitted the troops to "save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man" (vv. 17–18). These virgins became spoils of war for the soldiers.

Notice that Moses didn't stipulate that these soldiers had to marry a virgin captive before having sex with her. Throughout the Ancient Near East (ANE), and, unfortunately, throughout much of history, raping the women of a conquered people group was assumed to be a soldier's reward for victory. But even if we assume marriage was implied, imagine having to spend the rest of your life sexually gratifying the soldier who helped murder your family and tribe.<sup>13</sup>

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David's fame began with his courageous killing and decapitation of the giant Goliath (1 Sam 17:48–51). Before long he was revered for killing not just thousands, as Saul had done, but *tens of thousands*.<sup>14</sup> David's divinely sanctioned military campaigns are frequently celebrated in Scripture, affirming that it was his practice never to "leave a man or woman alive."<sup>15</sup>

This tells us a little bit about the violent mindset of God's people at the time. As was true throughout the ANE, it was a badge of honor for kings and warriors as well as for warrior-deities to be credited with mercilessly wiping out entire populations. And in this light, it's not surprising that the Psalmist believed he was complimenting Yahweh when he credited him with training his "hands for war" and his "fingers for battle."<sup>16</sup> Nor is it surprising that biblical authors believed they were complimenting God when they proclaimed that "the Lord

13. Elsewhere Moses states that if a soldier notices "a beautiful woman" and is "attracted to her" from among virgins who have been spared, he can marry her and then, after she's had a time to mourn the loss of her family and kin, have sex with her (Deut 21:10–13). Oddly enough, however, Moses adds that if at some point this soldier "is not pleased with her," he may "let her go" (v.14). Since the instructions about who Israelite soldiers were allowed to keep alive and what they were allowed to do with them vary throughout Deuteronomy and Joshua, we can't assume that marriage, even on a trial basis, was assumed in Numbers 31 or any other account where soldiers are allowed to "save for yourselves" virgins (Num 31:18).

14. 1 Sam 18:7–8; 21:11, 29:5.

15. 1 Sam 27:9–11; see also 1 Sam 23:2–5; 1 Chron 14:10–17.

16. Ps 144:1; see also Ps 18:34; 2 Sam 22:35.

gave David victory wherever he went” (2 Sam. 8:14), which meant leaving no man or woman alive.

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Other depictions of Yahweh commanding violence are found in the law of the OT. According to the biblical record, God instructed the Israelites to execute adulterers (Lev 20:10), fornicators (Lev 21:9), homosexuals (Lev 20:13), as well as people who had sex with their siblings (Lev 20:14), their daughters-in-law (Lev 20:16), or animals (Lev 20:15–16). Also to be executed were any son and mother (or stepmother) who had sex together, for they dishonored the father/husband (Lev 20:11).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, if the daughter of a priest “defiles herself by becoming a prostitute . . . she must be burned in the fire,” not so much because of her prostitution, but because “she has disgraced her father” (Lev 21:9).

Other capital offenses were associated with religious violations. For example, we find capital punishment prescribed for anyone who cursed God (Lev 24:16) or who worshiped or sacrificed to an idol (Exod 22:20). In fact, entire Israelite towns were devoted to destruction if they turned to idols.<sup>18</sup> Persons who practiced witchcraft, sorcery, divination, or other occult activities were also condemned to die, as was any false prophet.<sup>19</sup> So was anyone who so much as looked upon “holy furnishings” in the “tent of meeting,” as well as anyone who worked on the Sabbath, even merely gathering sticks.<sup>20</sup> This was the same fate priests met if they entered the tabernacle with their hair disheveled, their clothes torn, or after they had drunk any alcohol (Lev 10:6–10).

But the most disturbing laws are those that required the execution of children. Children who were stubborn, lazy, drunkards, gluttonous, or who struck their parents were to be stoned to death.<sup>21</sup>

Walter Kaiser, a renowned Evangelical OT scholar and apologist, attempts to defend the reasonableness of these laws by stressing their importance in preserving strong families in ancient Israel.<sup>22</sup> This is a

17. See also Deut 22:30.

18. Deut 13:15; cf. 7:4; 28:63.

19. Exod 22:18; Lev 20:27; Deut 18:20; cf. 13:1–5.

20. Exod 19:12–13; 33:20–21; 31:14; 35:2–3; Num 4:15–20; 18:3, 22, 32; 15:32–36.

21. Deut 21:18–21; Exod 21:15, 17; Lev 20:9.

22. W. Kaiser Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 95–97.

troubling defense. If these laws actually reflect the wisdom of God on how to preserve strong families, should we not be enforcing them *today*? In fact, couldn't Kaiser's argument be applied to *all* of the OT's capital offenses, since they all presumably reflect the wisdom of God?

I hope you agree that it's not wise to try to preserve strong families by killing disobedient children! And so I hope you're beginning to suspect that *something else was going on* when God breathed these barbarically violent laws into his written word.

## God Engaging in Violence

Yahweh not only commands violence in the OT, he sometimes is portrayed as actively engaging in it. The most famous example is the Genesis Flood that wiped out every living thing upon the earth with the exception of those few humans and animals that found refuge on the Ark (Genesis 6–8). Only slightly less famous is Yahweh's ferocious rain of fire that incinerated all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19).

Then there's the well-known account of Yahweh slaying the first-born son of every family that did not have blood on its doorposts in Egypt, which was followed by him drowning Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea.<sup>23</sup> The Israelites responded to this massacre by praising Yahweh as a mighty warrior who dashes his enemies to pieces (Exod 15:3, 6).

Some time later, when the Israelites were journeying in the wilderness, an ill-advised fellow named Korah led a group of complainers in a rebellion against Moses's leadership (Numbers 16). Some of these rebels were judged when the earth opened up and they "fell alive into Sheol" (v. 32), while others were incinerated by fire that fell from the sky (v. 35). Unfortunately, these violent judgments only succeeded in causing many other Israelites to start complaining, at which point "wrath [came] out from the Lord" and 14,700 Israelites were slaughtered by a plague (vv. 42, 46, 49).

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Some biblical portraits depict God engaging in violence that seems, quite frankly, capricious. The most famous example of this concerns

23. Exod 11:4–6; 12:12, 29–30; 14:23–28.

a “devoted servant” named Uzzah. This poor fellow was struck dead simply because he touched “the ark of God” in an attempt to keep it from falling off its cart while it was being transported to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:6–7).

David was understandably angry at Yahweh about this, but he was also a little freaked out. He decided he didn’t want the ark to reside anywhere near him (vv. 8–10). Since the ark had been killing just about everyone it had come in contact with, including seventy Israelites (1 Sam 6:19), David’s decision to have it sent to the home of Obed-Edom the Gittite instead of having it dwell in Jerusalem, where he lived, seems wise—though I suspect that Obed-Edom might not have agreed.<sup>24</sup>

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Some of the most brutal violence that’s ascribed to Yahweh in the OT is found in portraits of him using nations as instruments of judgment. For example, as Babylon was planning an attack on Israel, Yahweh is depicted as telling his people, “I am against you. I will draw my sword from its sheath and cut off from you both the righteous and the wicked . . . my sword will be unsheathed against everyone from south to north” (Ezek 21:3–4). As the Catholic priest and theologian Raymond Schwager notes, the indiscriminate killing of “both the righteous and the wicked . . . everyone from south to north,” gives the impression that Yahweh is “so blinded in bloody intoxication” that he “ignores the difference between the guilty and the innocent.”<sup>25</sup>

Other depictions of Yahweh using nations to judge his people are even more macabre. For example, Jeremiah depicts Yahweh declaring his commitment not to allow his compassion and mercy to influence him as he mercilessly slaughters families by smashing together parents and children, using Babylon as his servant (Jer 13:14). Later, the prophet quotes Yahweh saying to Israelite women that “he will pull up your skirts over your face,” a euphemism for a sexual assault.<sup>26</sup>

As challenging as it is to accept, I see no way of avoiding the con-

24. For other accounts of the ark’s violence, see 1 Sam 5:6–6:4. I address the problematic aspects of the ark of the covenant in *CWG*, vol. 2, ch. 25.

25. R. Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, 3rd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 54.

26. Jer 13:26, cf. v. 22; Nah 3:5.

clusions that these passages depict Yahweh as a warrior who planned on raping the women of the city he was about to conquer!

Along similar lines, Yahweh is portrayed as planning to trample his own “Virgin Daughter Judah” like one crushes grapes in a winepress (Lam 1:15). Try to imagine Israelite men, women, children, and infants being crushed by Yahweh like grapes being squashed in a winepress.

Other passages depict Yahweh declaring that, as judgment for the Israelites’ rebellion, parents would have to witness their babies being dashed to the ground, while pregnant women would have their unborn babies ripped out of their wombs.<sup>27</sup> And, perhaps the grisliest of all are the OT’s portraits of Yahweh causing parents to “eat their children” and children to “eat their parents.”<sup>28</sup>

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As morally revolting as these portraits of God are, if we confess Jesus to be Lord, I believe we are obliged to confess that all of them, together with the entire canon, are God-breathed. But at the same time, if we confess Jesus to be Lord, we also should feel obliged to insist that *something else is going on* when God’s breathing results in biblical authors ascribing such atrocities to God, for these depictions of God contradict what we learn about God in Jesus’s cross-centered life and ministry.

And whatever this *something else* turns out to be, it must smake clear how these ghastly divine portraits are signs that point to the self-sacrificial love of God revealed on Calvary.

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There you have it! The ugly elephant in our Christian room.

At this point in our exploration, I want to encourage you to embrace whatever cognitive dissonance you may be experiencing. For reasons that will become clear over the next several chapters, embracing this dissonance will actually help you discern *what else is going on* behind the scenes of the OT’s ugly portraits of God.

On this note, I’d like to bring this chapter to a close by sharing a word of advice from a thinker in the early church named Origen

27. Hos 13:16; cf. Isa 13:16.

28. Exod 5:9–10; Lev 26:28–29; Jer 19:7, 9; Lam 2:20.

whom I have found very helpful on this journey. In fact, his words contributed to my epiphany about how the OT's violent depictions of God bear witness to the crucified Christ.

Origen taught that when we come upon a biblical passage that seems unworthy of God, we must humble ourselves before God and ask the Spirit to help us find a deeper meaning in the passage that *is* worthy of God. He sometimes referred to this as a treasure buried in the depth of a passage. Origen believed that God intentionally buried treasures beneath the ugly and “unworthy” surface meaning of various passages to force us to mature spiritually as we humbly wrestle with Scripture and become more dependent on the Spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Like many other Christian thinkers in the first several centuries of church history, Origen considered all the violent portraits of God in the OT to be unworthy of God. Yet these thinkers didn't feel free to dismiss these portraits, for they firmly believed that *all* Scripture is inspired by God. These thinkers rather believed that *something else was going on* when Scripture represents God in ways that are inconsistent with what is revealed in Christ, and they patiently waited on the Holy Spirit and contemplated what this *something else* might be.

As a result, they believed the Spirit helped them discover the Christ-centered, God-glorifying treasure that was buried in the depths of this unworthy material.

I encourage you to heed Origen's advice: As you contemplate the unworthy yet divinely inspired material that we've just reviewed, surrender whatever cognitive dissonance you're experiencing to God. Humbly ask the Spirit to open and illuminate your mind. And be assured that Jesus was telling the truth when he taught that *all* Scripture is inspired by God for the purpose of pointing to him. We just need the ability to see it.

And as we shall now see, the key that opens up our eyes is Jesus himself.

29. For an extensive discussion on Origen's approach to Scripture's violent divine portraits, see *CWG*, vol. 1, ch. 10.