
The Faith of Jacob: Wrestling With “Strange” and “Alien” Portraits of God

The LORD will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim . . .
to do his work, his strange work,
and perform his task, his alien task.
—Isaiah 28:21

A curse on those who are lax in doing the LORD’s work!
A curse on those who keep their swords from bloodshed!
—Jeremiah 48:10

The Old Testament is responsible for more atheism, agnosticism, disbelief
—call it what you will—than any book ever written.
—A. A. Milne¹

It behooves us to be careful what we worship,
for what we are worshiping we are becoming.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson²

1. A. A. Milne, quoted in C. Romano, “Are Sacred Texts Sacred? The Challenge for Atheists,” *CHE*, September 21, 2007.

2. This quote has been frequently attributed to Emerson, though I (along with many others) have been unable to track down the original source. See, for example, “Talk: Waldo Emerson,” https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Ralph_Waldo_Emerson (accessed 12/29/16). In any event, the truth of the quote stands, with or without the authority of Emerson behind it.

The goal of this chapter is to lay the groundwork for all that is to follow by discussing three foundational issues. First, since my concern in this volume is to develop and defend a particular hermeneutic of Scripture, I need to go beyond what was said in the introduction and spell out a bit further my understanding of what is entailed in the confession that all Scripture is “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16).

Second, throughout this volume, as well as the one that follows, I will be encouraging readers to honestly wrestle with Scripture’s violent portraits of God. Yet, I am aware that the frank wrestling I will be encouraging readers to participate in may strike some as undermining faith in the “God-breathed” nature of Scripture. In this second section, therefore, I will argue that while the concept of faith that many contemporary western people embrace is incompatible with honestly questioning the way God sometimes is depicted in his written word, it is not at all incompatible with the biblical concept of faith. Indeed, I will argue that one’s willingness to question the way God appears when this appearance is out of character with the way God has revealed himself to be is, from a biblical perspective, an expression of faith, not the negation of faith.

Finally, while I am focused on the urgency of the theological challenge that Scripture’s violent portraits of God pose, there are also some very serious practical challenges that these portraits pose as well. I thus want to close this chapter by reviewing three of these challenges.

Implications of a “God-Breathed” Book

As I mentioned in the introduction, I consider it beyond dispute that Jesus and the authors of the NT shared the traditional Jewish view that all the material found within the canon was “God-breathed” (*theopneustos* [2 Tim 3:16]).³ For this reason, the church throughout history

3. The general attitude of first-century Jews toward Scripture is reflected in the ancient rabbinic comment, “whatever book has been included in the Bible canon must necessarily have been inspired or written by the Holy Spirit.” Meg. 7a; Tosef., Yad. ii. 14, cited in “Inspiration,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 12 vols., ed. Cyrus Adler and Isidore Singer (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901–6), 4:607. For two excellent overviews and discussions, see Rimon Kasher, “The Interpretation of Scripture in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Mikra*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 547–94; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 2, ed.

has traditionally confessed that all material within the canon of Scripture is “God-breathed.” Without going into the multitude of disputed issues that surround *how* God “breathed” Scripture—issues that I will in a moment argue are as unnecessary to unravel as they are impossible to resolve—I will begin to flesh out my understanding of this confession by simply registering my agreement with the historic-orthodox tradition that this “breathing” entails that God is, in some sense, the ultimate author of all canonical works.

I consider the translation of *theopneustos* as “God-breathed” to be superior to the more common “divine inspiration,” despite the fact that it may sound wooden and/or idiosyncratic to some readers.⁴ In my opinion, retaining the noun “God” in the translation better serves to remind us of the ultimate source of the “breathing” than the adjective “divine” does. Moreover, “inspiration” has come to be broadly applied to literature, music, art, and a host of other human productions that have nothing specifically to do with God. More importantly, “inspiration” has tended to lead people to locate God’s revelatory activity and authority on the individual human authors of Scripture. The assumption often is that God “inspired” (viz. breathed *into*) these people, thereby causing them to write what they wrote. By contrast, when Paul says all Scripture is *theopneustos*, the focus is rather on what God breathed *out*, thus making the biblical texts themselves the focus of God’s revelatory activity and authority.⁵ Indeed, the Greek word says

Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Matthew Black, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973), 314–21; on Jesus’s view of Scripture, see vol. 1, introduction, n. 2.

4. Out of respect for the ecclesial tradition and because my focus in this work is restricted to the final form of the canonical material, as I will discuss below, I will attribute disputed works, such as 1 Timothy as well as Colossians and Ephesians, to their traditional authors (e.g., Paul) throughout this work. However, I want it to be clear that by following this tradition, I am not thereby weighing in on the historical-critical debates surrounding the authorship of these works.
5. So argues A. T. B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 38–43. The classic work on *theopneustos* is B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948), 245–96. See also J. M. T. Winther, *Theopneusteia: The Bible’s Testimony Concerning Itself* (Tokyo: Lutheran Literature Society, 1956). For an excellent historical overview and systematic discussion of *theopneustos* from a strongly Christocentric perspective, see Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell L. Guder, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981–83), 1:228–47. Some have suggested translating 2 Tim 3:16 along the lines of “every scripture breathed by God is also useful . . .,” thus leaving open the possibility that some canonical texts were not “breathed” by God. See, for example, Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, trans. Philip Buttolph and Adela Yarbro, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 120. I side with those scholars who argue

nothing about the process (or various processes) God may have used to expire his word. It simply implies that whatever were the means, the end result is that these texts were “breathed” by God and thus carry divine authority.⁶

Restricting our attention to the “God-breathed” nature of canonical texts relieves us of the impossible burden of trying to determine the means by which God made Scripture suitable to speak on his behalf.⁷ It also means that insofar as we are reading Scripture to hear God’s word (viz. insofar as we are reading it theologically), we can focus on the final form that texts have assumed within the canon and not concern ourselves with whatever prehistory a text may have had prior to taking this form.⁸ This is not to deny the value of source, form, and/or redaction criticism for the academic investigation of the Bible. It is simply to assert that for a distinctly theological reading of Scripture such as we will be conducting in this work, nothing of consequence hangs in the balance on the extent to which we can (for example) confidently discern earlier, previously independent sources that were redacted together in the process of the canon’s formation. The theological reading of Scripture simply takes the final “God-breathed” form of the canon as its starting point, and it allows the interpretation of every particular passage to be influenced by the canon as a whole.⁹

that this translation is improbable on both historical and grammatical grounds. See David S. Dockery, “The Divine-Human Authorship of Inspired Scripture,” in *Authority and Interpretation: A Baptist Perspective*, ed. Duane A. Garrett and Richard R. Melick Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 21–22; G. Schrenk, “*graphō*,” in *TDNT*, 1:759.

6. As Sparks notes, *theopneustos* “does not really imply anything in particular about how the transaction between God and the human authors took place.” Kenton L. Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 56. See also Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, 133; Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 82–84.
7. While we need not attempt to understand the particular processes by which God “breathed” his written word, I will later argue (vol. 1, ch. 11) that a crucicentric understanding of divine “breathing” requires us to accept this as a dialectical, rather than a unilateral, activity. That is, God’s “breathing” his self-revelation on Calvary and in Scripture involved God not only acting toward humans but also God humbly allowing humans to act toward him, thereby conditioning the form his “breathing” took.
8. Throughout this work, I will assume that the “canon” refers to the sixty-six books that comprise the Protestant Bible.
9. The focus on the final form of the canon is an aspect of “canonical criticism.” See, for example, Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Paul R. Noble, *The Canonical Approach: A Critical Reconstruction of the Hermeneutics of Brevard S.*

Another important consequence of locating the “God-breathed” nature of Scripture on the canonical texts is that it means our estimation of Scripture’s divine authority does not depend on our determining the relationship any particular text has with “actual history”—which, of course, is always a scholarly reconstruction of what happened based on an evaluation of available evidence.¹⁰ As I will discuss at length in chapter 8, it is the “God-breathed” nature of the text that renders it authoritative, not the relation a text may or may not have with “actual history.” Yet, as I will also discuss in chapter 8, this starting point also means that I am not free to dismiss any portion of Scripture, including its violent portraits of God, simply because the narrative in which the portrait is found is judged by some to lack historical veracity.

In any event, while I will not altogether discontinue using “inspiration” in contexts in which “God-breathed” is simply too cumbersome, my preference throughout this work will be to use “God-breathed.” At the same time, it seems appropriate to place quotes around “God-breathed” as a reminder that I am quoting 2 Timothy 3:16 and that I am using it in place of the more customary term “inspired.”

Having spelled out in general terms the view of Scripture that will be assumed throughout this work, I turn now to the legitimacy, and even the necessity, of honestly questioning this very Scripture when it depicts God in ways that seem “strange” and “alien” to the way he has revealed himself to be in Jesus Christ (Isa 28:21).¹¹

Childs (New York: Brill, 1995); and J. N. Oswalt, “Canonical Criticism: Review from a Conservative Viewpoint,” *JETS* 30, no. 13 (September 1987): 317–25. For a comparison of an Evangelical canonical approach similar to my own and alternative canonical approaches, see J. C. Peckham, “The Analogy of Scripture Revisited: A Final Form Canonical Approach to Systematic Theology,” *MAJT* 22 (2011): 43–46. For an insightful discussion of the relationship between the canonical approach and classic Evangelical approaches to Scripture, see S. B. Chapman, “Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et al., Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 7 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 167–206. On the significance of dealing with the final form of the canon as it relates to a historical-critical assessment of the pre-canonical form of various texts, see Christopher Seitz, “Canonical Approach,” in *DTIB*, 101. I should note that while I adopt the common canonical approach assumption that every verse of Scripture should be interpreted in light of the entire canon of Scripture, I will later argue that the entire canon must be interpreted through the lens of the crucified Christ (vol. 1, chs. 2–5).

10. Hence I will place cautionary quotes around “actual history” throughout this work.

11. I will nuance my view of the “God-breathed” quality of Scripture in light of the “God-breathed” revelation of himself on the cross in vol. 1, ch. 11.

Embracing an “Israelite” Faith

Faith and Doubt

A widespread assumption among contemporary Christians is that faith is the antithesis of doubt. Hence, a person’s faith is typically thought to be as strong as it is free of doubt. As I have argued elsewhere, I believe this concept of faith is (among other things) unbiblical, for as we will see in a moment, there is a strong motif running throughout Scripture that suggests that being willing to honestly struggle with God and with his scriptural word lies at the heart of true faith.¹²

In my thirty-six years of working both as a pastor and professor at a Christian university, I have observed that when Christians assume that faith and doubt are incompatible, they typically work hard to avoid the latter. Indeed, when the strength of one’s faith is equated with the degree to which they are psychologically certain, the cognitive dissonance that accompanies doubt easily gets interpreted as something that is evil and that is therefore to be avoided at all costs. Hence, many who embrace this unfortunate model of faith understandably find it difficult, if not impossible, to honestly acknowledge—let alone feel the full force of—the merits of perspectives that challenge their belief system. Rather, they tend to quickly find solace in whatever responses are available to them, however inadequate these responses may be.

I am addressing this issue at the beginning of this work because while I trust it is by now clear that I strongly affirm the “God-breathed” nature of Scripture, the Cruciform Hermeneutic I will be proposing challenges the straightforward way most people have interpreted violent portraits of God, at least since the fifth century, and asks them to question the assumption that the meaning these portraits had for the original audience is the meaning they are supposed to have for us on this side of the cross.¹³ Yet this assumption, and, therefore, this

12. See Gregory A. Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt: Breaking the Idol of Certainty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013).

13. While the paradigm shift that took place with the Constantinian revolution of the church in the fourth and fifth centuries brought an end to the tradition of interpreting the OT’s violent portraits of God allegorically as a means of preserving a nonviolent conception of God, I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that the practice of accepting these portraits at face value only

straightforward way of interpreting these portraits, may feel so obvious to readers that to question it is tantamount to questioning the divine authority of Scripture itself. Hence, if these readers also assume that faith and doubt are antithetical, the request to question the straightforward meaning of any biblical portrait of God may be heard as a request to sin. And in this case, my proposal will be dismissed before it even gets a hearing.

To prevent this, I would like to help readers understand that biblical faith does not equate the strength of a person's faith with their level of psychological certainty. It thus does not view doubt as the antithesis of faith. And it therefore does not assume that questioning the way God sometimes appears in Scripture is sinful. To the contrary, it views our willingness to wrestle with God as virtuous.

Faith and Wrestling with God

Let us start by considering the name God gave his covenant people, "Israel." According to the Genesis narrative, this name goes back to a rather curious event that took place at a turning point in Jacob's life. This forefather of the nation of Israel entered into a night-long wrestling match with a "man," who turned out to be none other than Yahweh (Gen 32:24–32). Oddly enough, we are told that the Lord "could not overpower him" and that Jacob would not let the man go until he "blessed" him (v. 25). It was because of this tenacity that the Lord renamed him "Israel" (*Yisra'el*), which, according to this narrative, signifies one who struggles with God (v. 28).¹⁴ And it was for this reason that his descendants were called "Israelites." Their chief characteristic

began during this time. From the second century on, we find disagreements over the legitimacy of the allegorical approach both with regard to the interpretation of violent divine portraits and of Scripture as a whole. Also, I want to be clear that what ended in the fourth and fifth centuries was the tradition of interpreting the OT's violent portraits of God allegorically as a means of preserving a nonviolent conception of God. This qualification is necessary inasmuch as various Bible interpreters continued to offer allegorical interpretations of all aspects of Scripture, including its violent divine portraits. Their motivation, however, was no longer to distance God from violence, for, as I will discuss in vol. 1, ch. 6, attributing violence to God was no longer deemed problematic after the fifth century.

14. The actual etymology of the Hebrew term for "Israel" is contested. See Silvio Sergio Scatolini Apóstolo, "On the Elusiveness and Malleability of 'Israel,'" *JHebS* 6 (2006): 24, <http://tinyurl.com/zo3elud>; H.-J. Zobel, "yisra'el," in *TDOT*, 6:397–401.

was that they tenaciously wrestle with God, just as their forefather had done.

Many of the heroes of the faith throughout the OT lived up to this name.¹⁵ Like Jacob, they had the courage and the integrity to challenge God when his behavior seemed “strange” and “alien” (Isa 28:21). Abraham, for example, was forthright in pushing back on the Almighty when he shared with him his plan to annihilate Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:23–33). Moses had enough faith to protest God’s plan to annihilate his covenant people (Exod 32:10–14). A short while later, he challenged Yahweh’s expressed plan to send the Israelites into the promised land without Yahweh (Exod 33:12–16). Significantly enough, far from being offended at the audacity of these challenges, God responded positively to all three, with the latter two resulting in a merciful alteration of the divine plan. When God’s people wrestle with him, it seems, it affects God as well as humans.

The Bible is filled with similar examples of Jacob-like wrestling matches with God. For example, the biblical “lament” genre—including the “complaint against God” tradition—is found throughout the OT.¹⁶ Many psalms boldly raise questions, express doubts, and even level accusations concerning God’s faithfulness while challenging the justice of his providential rule (e.g., Ps 89:19–44). Similarly, the prophet Habakkuk boldly charged God with treating the wicked better than the righteous (e.g., Hab 1:3–4, 13), while Jeremiah had the audacity to

15. For a survey, see Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1990), 3–40.

16. On the lament and/or complaint tradition in Scripture (and elsewhere), see Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); LeAnn Snow Flesher, Carol J. Dempsey, and Mark J. Boda, eds., *Why? . . . How Long? Studies on Voice(s) of Lamentation Rooted in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); W. Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *JST* 11, no. 36 (1986): 57–71; Richard A. Hughes, *Lament, Death, and Destiny* (New York: Lang, 2004); W. Kynes, “The Trials of Job: Relitigating Job’s ‘Good Case’ in Christian Interpretation,” *SJT* 66, no. 2 (May 2013): 174–91; Laytner, *Arguing with God*; Carleen Mandolfo, *God in the Dock: Dialogic Tension in the Psalms of Lament* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); William S. Morrow, *Protest against God: The Eclipse of a Biblical Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006); Claus Westermann, “The Complaint against God,” in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed., Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms of Lament*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: Knox, 1981). On the ebb and flow of lament within church history, see Hughes, *Lament, Death, and Destiny*. Wolterstorff has offered some very powerful insights on lament at both a theological and practical/personal level. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, “If God Is Good and Sovereign, Why Lament?,” *CTJ* 36 (2001): 42–52; cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

accuse God of torturing his own people to the point of causing mothers to devour their own offspring (Lam 1:12–15; 2:1–12, 17–22; cf. 4:9–10).

Yet, perhaps the most poignant illustration of the “Israelite” faith comes from a servant of God who was not even an Israelite. Precisely because of his exemplary faithfulness, Job was unwittingly recruited to refute Satan’s accusation before the heavenly court that God was a Machiavellian ruler who manipulated people into serving him (Job 1:8–11). As Job’s pain and anger grew, he ended up accusing God of viciously mistreating him and others (e.g., Job 9:17, 22–24; 10:3, 8, 16–20; 16:12–14; 24:12). Though God eventually chastised him for his uninformed accusations (for which Job himself repented [Job 42:1–6]), God nevertheless commended the honesty of his talk. Unlike his pious-sounding “friends,” Job’s speech was authentic (*kûn*, Job 42:7).¹⁷ Yahweh clearly appreciates raw honesty more than pious platitudes. And it is this honesty that vindicated God’s character in this work, which means that this honesty is considered to be a form of faithfully serving God, even though it involved Job revolting against God. Job is considered a hero of faith (e.g., Jas 5:11) because, like so many others, he engaged in a “faithful revolt.”¹⁸

A different way in which Scripture arguably illustrates the wrestling-with-God motif concerns the manner in which certain canonical traditions challenge and/or qualify earlier canonical traditions.¹⁹ For example, while an earlier tradition depicted Yahweh as

17. On the Hebrew word *kûn*, see vol. 2, ch. 23, n. 36.

18. On Job as an example of the OT complaint-against-God or “faithful revolt” tradition, see Kynes, “Trials of Job”; Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did* (San Francisco: Metanoia Books, 2014), 38. It is worth noting that Jesus arguably endorses this “revolt” tradition both in his teachings (e.g., Luke 11:5–9, 18:1–8) and by his example (i.e., in his “cry of dereliction” on the cross). See J. Gerald Janzen, *Job* (Atlanta: Knox, 1985), 159; Kynes, “Trials of Job,” 188–89; Flood, *Disarming Scripture*, 23–46. I discuss Jesus’s cry on the cross, as well his last-minute request to his Father to not undergo the suffering he was facing (Matt 26:39), in relation to the perfection of his faith in Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt*, 93–96.

19. This is one aspect of a broad field of biblical research known as “intertextual criticism.” This discipline studies the way canonical passages interact with, and even argue with, each other. For several good introductions and illustrations of this discipline, reflecting somewhat different perspectives, see Sipke Draisma, ed. *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings* (Kampen: Kok, 1989); Richard B. Hays, Stefan Alkier, and Leroy A. Huizenga, *Reading the Bible Intertextually* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009); Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); and especially Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). For a treatment of intertextual

enjoying animal sacrifices (e.g., Exod 29:25, 41; Lev 1:9, 13, 17), later authors make it clear that Yahweh placed no value on them (e.g., Ps 51:16–17; Isa 1:11–14; Mic 6:6–8; Amos 5:21–25; Hos 6:6; Matt 9:13; Heb 10:8). While I will later offer a crucicentric interpretation of this alteration that discloses how it bears witness to the cross (vol. 2, ch. 14), for the present we need only note that its inclusion within the canon illustrates that the biblical understanding of faith does not rule out calling long-established traditions—including biblical traditions—into question.

Another example of later traditions pushing back on earlier ones, according to some scholars, concerns several traditions embedded in the canonical conquest narrative that speak of Yahweh hoping to non-violently relocate the Canaanites (Deut 7:15, 18–19; Exod 23:20–23, 27–30; Lev 18:24–25). While I will again offer a crucicentric interpretation of these traditions later on (vol. 2, ch. 20), it may be true, as some argue, that they were originally redacted into the conquest narrative to soften and qualify the depiction of Yahweh commanding Moses to have the Israelites engage in a practice known as *hērem*, which involves annihilating a people-group as an act of worship.²⁰ Related to this, Douglas Earl argues that despite its reputation as the most violent and parochial book of the Bible, the book of Joshua was written, in part, to challenge earlier authoritative traditions that depict God as for and against people simply on the basis of their ethnicity and geographical location (e.g., Deut 7:1–5).²¹ The unexpected and very cryptic appearance of the captain of the Lord’s angelic army who announces his neutrality in war (Josh 5:13–14) is an important element of Earl’s interpretation, as are various episodes in which “outsiders” become “insiders” and vice versa.²²

Much more could be said, but I trust this suffices to demonstrate that

criticism as it specifically relates to the peace motif and war traditions in Scripture, see James E. Brenneman, *Canons in Conflict: Negotiating Texts in True and False Prophecy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Flood, *Disarming Scripture*, 33–46.

20. See, for example, John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994), 78–79. I will discuss *hērem* at length in vol. 1, ch. 7.

21. Douglas S. Earl, *The Joshua Delusion? Rethinking Genocide in the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010).

22. *Ibid.*, 121–23. See also Earl’s more academic work: *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 139–40. While I agree with Earl’s argument that we find competing

while challenging the way God may appear in certain biblical traditions may seem antithetical to the model of faith and/or model of biblical inspiration embraced by some contemporary believers, this is certainly not the case in Scripture. For the essence of faith in Scripture is not about blind submission to authoritative traditions or the quest for psychological certainty. It is rather an “Israelite” faith in which the depth of a person’s faith in God is sometimes reflected precisely in their willingness to authentically “wrestle” with him.

A Covenantal Rather Than Psychological Concept

The reason why the widespread contemporary understanding of faith differs so much from the biblical understanding is that “faith” in the Bible is a *covenantal* concept while today it has largely become a *psychological* concept. And whereas the modern psychological concept motivates people to seek and cling to a feeling of certainty, the biblical concept is about retaining covenantal trust in one’s covenant partner in the face of uncertainty.²³ When Yahweh’s covenant partners voice their questions and objections to his apparently “strange” and “alien” behavior, they are manifesting their confidence that their covenant relationship with God is solid enough to handle their expressed complaints, confusions, and even occasional accusations.²⁴ And they are manifesting their confidence that at the end of the day, God will demonstrate that he has the faithful and benevolent character he claims he has, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding.

This book stands solidly within this “Israelite” tradition. Precisely because I am convinced that we are called to believe that God looks like Jesus Christ (John 14:7–9), the one and only “exact representation

traditions in Joshua, I will later critique his overall reading of Joshua as a way of explaining away its horrifically violent portraits of God (vol. 2, ch. 19).

23. On the relational/covenantal nature of biblical faith, see Boyd, *Benefit of the Doubt*, 112–52; Maureen W. Yeung, *Faith in Jesus and Paul: A Comparison with Special Reference to “Faith that Can Move Mountains” and “Your Faith Has Healed/Saved You”* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 297; N. T. Wright, “Faith, Virtue, Justification, and the Journey to Freedom,” in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, ed. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kavin Rowe, and A. Katherine Grieb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 483–89.

24. We should note, for example, how frequently lament psalms end with a reassurance of God’s true character, appearances notwithstanding (e.g., Psalm 22).

of God's being" (Heb 1:3), I am equally convinced that we must tenaciously wrestle with God over the canonical depictions of him that are inconsistent with the *agape*-centered character disclosed in this supreme revelation. And, above all, I believe we must do so with complete honesty: honesty before God, ourselves, and others, and honesty with the texts that we are struggling to understand.²⁵

The Fear of Novelty

While some readers might have reservations about my proposal because their conception of faith makes them hesitant to question or doubt the way they have always interpreted certain passages of Scriptures, I suspect that others may have reservations simply because my proposed interpretation contains seemingly novel elements.

The first thing that needs to be said in response to such reservations is this: as I noted in the introduction, there is in principle nothing new about the claim that Scripture should be interpreted through the lens of the crucified Christ. I am, in fact, simply trying to be completely consistent with the Christocentric hermeneutic the church has always professed.

Closely related to this, there is absolutely nothing novel about the fact that I am questioning the exegetical meaning of portraits of God in Scripture while looking for a deeper theological meaning, since this too has been a widespread practice of the church. As I also mentioned in the introduction, the only novel aspect of my approach is that I am applying this practice to *violent* portraits of God. I strongly suspect that had the reinterpretative approach of Origen and others not been aborted in the fourth and fifth centuries—for illegitimate reasons, as I will argue in chapter 6—and had the church been fully consistent with its own Christocentric and, sometimes, crucicentric hermeneutical convictions (e.g., Luther), something like the Cruciform Hermeneutic I am developing in this volume and the Cruciform Thesis I will be

25. So argues Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword*, 227–28, 233–35.

developing in the next volume in all likelihood would have been proposed centuries ago.

A third response to any who are concerned with novelty is that we need to remember that the church has always confessed that the Holy Spirit is at work as Christians struggle with God and with one another to interpret Scripture. While the principle *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* (the church reformed and always reforming) is a distinctly Reformed principle, it captures a humility and openness that the church has always tried to advocate, though it has often fallen short of this ideal. The shared assumption has been that while the foundation of the church was laid once-and-for-all in Scripture, we must never assume we have “arrived” at a once-and-for-all place in which we need no longer be open to God giving us new interpretive insights into his written word.

This emphasis has been especially strong within the Anabaptist tradition, which is the primary theological orientation out of which this book is written.²⁶ Because their theological convictions placed them

26. A word needs to be said about how I will be applying the “Anabaptist” label throughout this work. While sixteenth-century opponents attached this label to any group that practiced adult baptism, regardless of the vast differences that distinguished them, I am reserving it for those who not only practiced adult baptism but who embraced the distinctive theological and lifestyle convictions that became normative for the Anabaptist tradition that arose out of the tumultuous sixteenth century. For a succinct overview of this diversity and of conflicts among groups that practiced adult baptism, see Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 17–45. The earliest expression of the core convictions that became normative for the Anabaptist tradition is found in the Schleithem Confession (1527).

I am thus using the “Anabaptist” label as a theological descriptor that would rule out (say) the violent, theocratic, apocalyptic, polygamous sect that reigned for several years in Münster Germany (1532–35). My use of the “Anabaptist” label as a theological descriptor has nothing to do with the debate over whether Anabaptism had a single point of origin or (as most hold today) multiple points of origin. For a representation of the “monogenesis” perspective, see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1963). For a defense of the “polygenesis” perspective, see James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, “From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins,” *MQR* 49 (1975): 83–121. I believe my theological application of this label is consistent with Ray Gingerich’s argument that “the life-giving function” of sixteenth-century Anabaptist writings should be considered normative for contemporary Anabaptism rather than “the total corpus of sixteenth-century . . . writings” of people who practiced adult baptism. Ray Gingerich, “The Canons of Anabaptism: Which Anabaptism? Whose Canon?,” in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2008), 191, 205. My application is also consistent with Arnold Snyder’s call for a move “beyond polygenesis.” Arnold Snyder, “Beyond Polygenesis: Rediscovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology,” in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 1–34.

outside the Christendom paradigm that all others worked within, Anabaptists have typically demonstrated a greater willingness than others to question the church's "official" interpretations of Scripture. Moreover, as we will discuss in chapter 6, Anabaptists have tended to place significantly more emphasis than others on a Christocentric and crucicentric approach to Scripture and discipleship.²⁷ For this reason, they have tended to be more sensitive than others to the ways in which the church's hermeneutical tradition might conflict with Christ's teaching and example.

Finally, I believe that the traditional confidence that God is always working through a community's wrestling with Scripture to reveal insights that go beyond, and even sometimes against, traditional interpretations is well-grounded in Scripture. For example, as we will discuss in the following chapter, Jesus certainly interpreted the OT in ways that defied its traditional interpretation (e.g., Matt 5:21–48). Indeed, it is significant that Jesus several times warned people of being overly bound by religious traditions (e.g., Mark 7:8–9). Similarly, NT authors were clearly led by the Spirit to find new, Christocentric interpretations of OT passages that had no precedent in their Jewish tradition, as we will discuss in chapter 3.

The same Spirit-led openness to new insights is reflected in Luke and Paul when they taught that the Spirit worked to open the minds of disciples so they could see something in Scripture they had not seen before: namely, how the OT is fundamentally about Jesus (Luke 24:25–32, 44–47; 2 Cor 3:7–4:6). And we can discern this same openness to Spirit-led novelty at the first church council in Jerusalem. After a period of intense conflict (yes, the Spirit works through conflict), James announced the council's decision by proclaiming what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). The Spirit-led decision of the church's leadership to embrace Gentiles as sisters and brothers in the Lord without imposing the Jewish law on them was novel, bold, and

27. See Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000), 20. I will discuss the unprecedented intensity of the Anabaptist Christocentric hermeneutic in vol. 1, ch. 5.

controversial. Yet, it was of God and moved the church forward in its ministry to Gentiles.

A Question of Balance

In this light, it seems that the wisest approach for Bible interpreters to assume is similar to the approach taken in science: namely, we should never simply disregard the authority of tradition, but we should also never fear modifying it and moving beyond it when given sufficient reason to do so.²⁸ I will attempt to exemplify this balanced approach throughout this work in several ways.

First, out of respect for the church's interpretive tradition, I must accept that insofar as the cruciform interpretation of violent portraits of God that I will be proposing modifies the way they have traditionally been interpreted, at least since the fifth century, the burden of proof is on me to establish sufficient reason for accepting it. Second, because I share the traditional conviction that God has always been working within the interactions of the community of his people to deepen their understanding of Scripture and of himself, I will constantly place my own perspectives in dialogue with the views of others, past and present.²⁹ Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that I am now submitting my proposal to the larger body of Christ for consideration.

As one who stands within the Anabaptist tradition, I embrace the principle of a "community hermeneutic" and believe it is up to the wider body of Christ to discern over time the degree to which my proposed cross-centered way of interpreting Scripture's violent divine portraits is Spirit-inspired and carries merit and/or the degree to which it is merely a human-generated idea that carries no real merit.³⁰

28. For an insightful discussion of the relationship between the authority of tradition and novelty in science, on the one hand, and in theology, on the other, see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 39–51.

29. I affirm the validity of the Wesleyan quadrilateral, and, in particular, its postulation of the ecclesial tradition as an authority to be considered for theology and biblical interpretation. See Don Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

30. It seems that from the start, Anabaptists strove to practice a community/congregational hermeneutic, sometimes referred to as the "rule of Paul" (e.g., 1 Cor 14:29). See John D. Roth, "Community as Conversation: A New Model of Anabaptist Hermeneutics," in *Essays in Anabaptist*

If the “Gamaliel principle” is true (Acts 5:38–39), time will eventually resolve the issue.

Based on the precedent of Spirit-led novel interpretations that we find in the NT and throughout the church tradition, all I can ask of readers is that they consider my proposal in its entirety with an open mind. As you digest this work, I ask readers to submit it to the following sorts of questions: Is my defense of a robust Christocentric, and therefore crucicentric, hermeneutic compelling? Is each of the four principles that comprise the Cruciform Thesis, as I will discuss in volume 2, sufficiently grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ crucified and adequately confirmed throughout Scripture? Does the cruciform interpretation of Scripture’s violent divine portraits adequately account for their morally objectionable features? Even more importantly, does each of these principles help disclose how these violent portraits bear witness to Jesus Christ crucified, at least better than alternative ways of interpreting these portraits? And to ask this last question is to ask: Do the Cruciform Hermeneutic and the Cruciform Thesis glorify the God who is decisively revealed on Calvary? For this, in my opinion, must be the ultimate goal of our reading of Scripture, of our theologizing, and of our lives.

Theology, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 45. The core conviction of this “community hermeneutic” is that the Spirit works through the ecclesial community. Hence, individual interpretations of Scripture must eventually be submitted to the wider body for consideration and discernment. While the early Anabaptists applied this principle only to faith communities within a given region that shared the Anabaptists distinctive convictions, our technological world provides us with the opportunity to apply it to the church at large, and I see much value taking advantage of this opportunity. On the Anabaptist “community hermeneutic,” see Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 157–85; John D. Roth, *Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 43–44, 48–50, 54–56; Walter Klaassen, “Anabaptist Hermeneutics: Presuppositions, Principles and Practice,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 9–10; John Howard Yoder, “The Hermeneutics of the Anabaptists,” *MQR* 41 (1967): 300–304; Lloyd Peitersen, *Reading the Bible after Christendom* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012), 76–78.

The Importance of Our Mental Picture of God

Our Mental Picture of God

While my main motivation for wrestling with the problem posed by violent portraits of God is to disclose how all Scripture bears witness to the crucified Christ, I am also motivated by an awareness that the way people envision God matters a great deal, and nothing impacts people's picture of God more than the way they understand their sacred Scripture. The question for Christians is this: Will our view of God be completely determined by the self-sacrificial love revealed on the cross or will it also be influenced by portraits of God doing things like commanding capital punishment for homosexuals (Lev 20:13) and rebellious children (Deut 21:18–21; Exod 21:15, 17; Lev 20:9), commanding genocide (e.g., Deut 7:2, 16), incinerating cities (Genesis 19), and striking a servant down for trying to prevent a sacred object from falling (2 Sam 6:6–7)?

How one answers this question deeply affects both their personal relationship with God and their relationships with others. On the personal level, our relationship with God is completely mediated by our mental conceptions of him. The depth of our love and the vibrancy of our relationship with God can never outrun the beauty of our conceptions of him. So too, the beauty of our life will never outrun the beauty of the way we envision God. Paul reflects this conviction when he teaches that the degree to which our lives will be transformed “from one degree of glory to another” is completely dependent on the Spirit removing the “veil” over our “minds” (2 Cor 3:12–16). This empowers us to “see the Lord as though reflected in a mirror” and to behold “the glory of God” shining in “the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 3:18, 4:6).³¹ The principle of Paul's teaching is that we take on the image of the God we mentally envision, and, as Origen observed, this is true for better or for worse.³²

31. For a fuller discussion of this passage, see Gregory A. Boyd, *Seeing is Believing: Experience Jesus Through Imaginative Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 86–89.

32. See *ibid.*, 91. For a contemporary application of this principle to explain religious violence

THE CRUCIFIXION OF THE WARRIOR GOD

In this light, it is no surprise that the thing that the serpent in the Garden went after to cause the first couple to fall was their mental picture of God (Gen 3:1–5). In place of a trustworthy God who had their best interest in mind, the serpent, which Christians later identified as Satan, depicted God as manipulative and self-serving. The only reason God commanded the couple not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was because he did not want them become “wise” like him. In other words, God didn’t want any competition. And, as early Christian thinkers understood, the principle way Satan and demons continue to draw people away from the true God is by corrupting “the right conception of Him,” which is given us in Christ.³³

Regardless of what sense we make of the OT’s violent portraits of God, therefore, it is vitally important we base our conception of God of the revelation of God in Christ.

Violent Gods Produce Violent Devotees³⁴

I would now like to discuss, in some detail, the negative side of the claim that we inevitably take on the image of the God we worship. Especially since 9/11, multitudes of scholars have become intensely concerned with the manner in which violent depictions of God in

throughout history and today, see Matthias Beier, *A Violent God-Image: An Introduction to the Work of Eugen Drewermann* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

33. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 6:44.

34. While everyone seems to know violence when they see it, it is notoriously hard to precisely define, as Tolan has noted. P. H. Tolan, “Understanding Violence,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Violent Behavior and Aggression*, ed. Daniel J. Flannery, Alexander T. Vazsonyi, and Irwin D. Waldman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5. Since I doubt anyone would question whether or not the depictions of God commanding and engaging in violence in the OT actually qualify as “violence,” I see no need to weigh in on these disputed issues. It will suffice for me to simply note three points I will defend in volume 2. First, I contend that God cannot be said to act violently when he sees he must allow other agents to freely choose to engage in violence. Second, I will argue that God cannot be said to act violently when he uses violence that others freely chose to engage in to further his own good purposes, including bringing judgment on hardened rebels. And third, I will contend that the violent metaphors that Scripture employs to describe “spiritual warfare” should not be taken literally. Thus, we need not think that “spiritual warfare” involves actual “violence.” For a sampling of definitions and discussions of violence, see Tolan, “Understanding Violence,” 5–18; S. Tamar Kamionkowski, “The ‘Problem’ of Violence in Prophetic Literature: Definitions as the Real Problem” in *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage*, ed. David A. Berant and Jonathan Klawans (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 38–46; Mary R. Jackman, “Violence in Social Life,” *ARS* 28 (2002): 389; T. E. Freheim, “God and Violence in the Old Testament,” *WW* 24 (2004): 19; Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 8–9.

sacred literature can incline those who believe in them toward violence.³⁵ Indeed, as Phillip Jenkins notes, violent sacred texts are “receiving more attention today than they have for centuries.”³⁶

Miroslav Volf captures the concern of many when he notes,

as long as societies remain conflict-ridden, people will seek to draw religious symbols into their conflicts, to use them as weapons in their wars. How can you resist making your gods, your symbols of ultimate meaning, fight for you when the life of your family or your country is at stake!? You cannot—unless your god refuses to fight.³⁷

So long as we worship gods who fight, Volf is arguing, we will inevitably follow suit and feel justified fighting in their name. Our warrior gods become the means by which we give divine authority to our personal, tribal, and national vendettas, thereby providing religious motivation for people to fight on behalf of these vendettas. For this reason, many scholars now contend that the exaltation of divinely sanctioned violence in sacred literature is the single most important resource for “an ideology of violence.”³⁸

Some go so far as to argue that religion in general, and Christianity and/or monotheism in particular, is inherently violent.³⁹ They thus

35. On the significance of 9/11, see Jerome F. D. Creach, *Violence in Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 1; Simon J. Joseph, *The Nonviolent Messiah: Jesus, Q, and the Enochic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 51. Since 9/11, there has been an explosion of works addressing this issue. See, for example, Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005); Beier, *Violent God-Image*; Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs, eds., *Must Christianity be Violent? Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003); Dereck Daschke and Andrew Kille, eds., *A Cry Instead of Justice: The Bible and Cultures of Violence in Psychological Perspective* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010); Richard S. Hess and E. A. Martens, eds., *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008); Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword*; James W. Jones, *Blood that Cries Out from the Earth: The Psychology of Religious Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2003); Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003); and the acclaimed series edited by J. Harold Ellens, *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 4 vols. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004). For an older but still relevant work that addresses the influence of the OT's religious war tradition on the concept of jihad in Islam, see Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 22–26.

36. Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword*, 21.

37. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 284.

38. Bettina E. Schmidt and Ingo W. Schröder, “Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices,” in *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 8.

argue that the “ideology of violence” can only be brought to an end when belief in God and/or gods has come to an end. By contrast, Volf correctly notes that the problem is not the belief in gods as such but with the belief in gods who fight. Hence, to break the pattern of violent deities being appealed to as a means of justifying and motivating violent behavior, we must place our faith in a god who “refuses to fight.”⁴⁰

As I shall argue in chapters 4 and 5, this is precisely what we find in Jesus, whose mission and revelation of God is oriented around the cross. Not only does this God refuse to fight, but he chooses to instead lay down his life as a human out of love for his enemies while commanding his followers to be willing to do the same. Unfortunately, the revelation of this nonviolent, self-sacrificial, enemy-embracing God has been significantly compromised throughout history by being fused with the portraits of a “god who fights” in the OT. As a result, Christians from the fifth century on have frequently fallen into the age-long pattern of fighting in the name of a fighting god.

A Tragic Legacy of Violence

The fact that violent depictions of God influence people toward violence is all-too-well documented in history. John Howard Yoder is on the mark when he observes that “for centuries, at least from the time

39. See, for example, Jan Assmann, *Die mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (München: Hanser, 2003); Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007); Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Guy G. Stroumsa, “Early Christianity as Radical Religion,” *IOS* 14 (1994): 173–93. On the basis of the harm done by professed Christians and other religious persons throughout history, some have formulated an “argument from harm” against belief in God and/or religion in general. See, for example, J. A. Buijs, “Atheism and the Argument from Harm,” *PC* 11, no. 1 (2009): 42–52.
40. For several defenses of the essentially nonviolent nature of monotheism within the Judeo-Christian tradition—the sad legacy of violence within the church notwithstanding—see E. Zenger, “Gewalt als Preis der Wahrheit?” in *Religion, Politik und Gewalt: Kongressband des XII. Europäischen Kongresses für Theologie, 18.–22. September 2005 in Berlin*, ed. Friedrich Schweitzer (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 35–77; Eben Scheffler, “War and Violence in the Old Testament World: Various Views,” in *Animosity, the Bible, and Us*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald, Fika J. van Rensburg, and Herrie F. van Rooy (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 1–17; Kirsten Nielsen, “The Violent God of the Old Testament: Reading Strategies and Responsibility,” in *Encountering Violence in the Bible*, ed. Markus Zehnder and Harvard Hagelia (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 207–15.