

INTRODUCTION

Thinking Rightly about God and the Problem of the Old Testament

The overwhelming image of God in the Bible is that of a brutal, violent, and vengeful judge. In a world being torn apart by violence, there is no more urgent task than to counter the Bible's frequent and nauseating portraits of a ruthless and violent deity. The cruelty of God, however, is a problem that almost no one is willing to face squarely, including Christian interpreters.

—JACK NELSON-PALLMEYER¹

Our understanding of God has enormous practical significance. . . . What we think of God and how we respond to Him are closely related. An inaccurate view of God can have disastrous effects on personal religious experience. We could never love a hostile, tyrannical being. . . . And we could not respect a mild, indulgent figure who never took us seriously. Our personal religious experience can be healthy only if we hold an adequate conception of God.

—RICHARD RICE²

In a course I teach titled “Issues of War, Peace and Social Justice in Biblical Texts,” we spend some time looking at the image of God as divine warrior in the Old Testament. The first couple of assignments require students to read passages like Exodus 1—15, Joshua 6—11, and 1 Samuel 15. These passages portray

God as involved in horrific acts of violence: sending devastating plagues on Egypt, commanding the total destruction of Canaanite cities, and commissioning Saul to utterly annihilate every last Amalekite. This is new terrain for some students, even for some who have grown up hearing Bible stories all their lives. One semester, after just the second day of class, a student wrote a journal entry revealing the significant impact reading these passages was having on her. She writes:

I am very surprised at the nature of God and the character of God that is expressed in the Old Testament passages you have assigned to us. Perhaps it is because I have never really spent that much time reading the Old Testament before, and never before have I been asked to formally analyze or read the passages as in depth as I have been for this class. Of course, growing up in a church environment, I recognized almost every story I read about, especially Moses and the Egyptians, and Joshua and the city of Jericho.

Somehow, after years of Sunday school and class, only the positive images of God were left to me, such as how He always helped Israel win and be victorious. But after the past two days of reading all these Old Testament scriptures and passages, I am very surprised at God's commands to slaughter every man, woman, and child in the cities. Somehow, these commands seem brutal, unfair, and unjust.

So even after just two days of class, I find myself struggling with the image of God in the Old Testament and the image of God in the New Testament. The same God seems like two completely different people to me. On the one hand, God is this vengeful, merciless, unforgiving God but on the other hand, I have always understood Him to be a forgiving, compassionate, and merciful God. These war stories seem to utterly contradict the image of God in the New Testament.

So I find myself trying to understand these passages and the motives of God in the Old Testament with the Israelites. Hopefully, as class continues, I will be able to understand the differences I am learning about in the character of God. Right now, I cannot understand the cruelty and violence of God and His commands to the Israelites to massacre everyone.

This student is not alone. Many readers of the Old Testament would be quick to echo her concerns and confusion. Some of the things God is reported to have said and done in the Old Testament are rather troubling, to say the least.

Throughout this book, I will generally refer to God's troubling conduct in the Old Testament as "disturbing divine behavior." This behavior, in turn, results in what I call "problematic portrayals" (or "troubling images") of God. Others refer to this disturbing divine behavior as the "dark side of God" and describe the passages containing it as "morally dubious" and "texts of terror."³ Whatever words or phrases

one uses, the point is the same: in the Old Testament, God sometimes acts in ways that leave readers perplexed and bothered.

In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to explain why some people—though certainly not all—find certain aspects of God’s behavior in the Old Testament problematic. First, however, it may help to describe my own journey as it relates to the issues at hand. This will provide a context for understanding how my interest in this topic developed and for appreciating why it is so important to me.⁴

A Personal Journey

I consider myself very fortunate to have been born into a Christian home. My parents encouraged my regular participation in the life of the church, and we faithfully attended Morning Hour Chapel, one of three hundred Brethren in Christ churches in North America. As a denomination, the Brethren in Christ are theologically conservative with roots in the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan traditions. True to its Anabaptist heritage, the denomination maintains a strong peace stance even though many members do not fully embrace the church’s official position on militarism and war.

Both at home and at church, I learned the paramount importance of the Bible at an early age. The Bible was, after all, God’s word. It was to be read, memorized, and, most importantly, obeyed. Though I have no recollection of anyone telling me this in so many words, I instinctively knew the Bible was not to be questioned or challenged. It was the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice.

Growing up, I had an unusual interest in the New Testament and devoted an inordinate amount of time to reading and studying that part of the Bible. But it would not be until my second semester at Messiah College in 1989 that I would discover my real passion. That semester, I took an Old Testament survey class with Terry Brensinger. Terry was one of those gifted professors who was able to bring the Bible to life. But he did more than that. Throughout the semester, he constantly demonstrated how the Old Testament applies to our lives. Realizing that these ancient texts could speak to me today was nothing short of amazing. In fact, it was life changing. I began to realize that the Old Testament was a virtual treasure trove I had barely begun to explore. Over the next three years, I took every Old Testament class I possibly could. But far from satisfying my hunger for Old Testament insights, all this simply whet my appetite for more. So I continued my studies at Asbury Theological Seminary for the next four years.

During those eight years in college and seminary, the Old Testament came alive for me and profoundly shaped my understanding of God, the world, and humanity in more ways than I can recall. I came to appreciate how central trusting God is to Christian faith. I learned how dangerous it is for people to create their own solutions apart from God. I witnessed God’s deep and abiding desire to be in relationship

with people and observed how time and again God tenaciously stuck with the Israelites even *after* they repeatedly messed up. In short, I realized the Old Testament was teeming with theological insight and wisdom.

But as I was learning this, I also realized that the Old Testament raised certain problems for Christian readers like me. For example, how could the Old Testament's depiction of God as warrior be reconciled with my belief that war is categorically wrong? As a member of a denomination with a strong peace position, this was an important question for me. During my final year at seminary, I wrestled with this issue in a master's thesis titled "Yahweh as Warrior: Old Testament Perspectives on God's Involvement in War." Although I devoted some 140 pages to the topic, trying my best to make sense of God's participation in war, I now judge my own conclusions to be completely unsatisfying.

After graduating from seminary in 1996, I returned to Messiah College, where I began teaching part-time before beginning doctoral studies in Old Testament the following year at Drew University. During the next five years, as I continued teaching at Messiah and working on my doctorate, I became troubled by an even greater array of disturbing depictions of God in the Old Testament. I discovered numerous texts in which God's behavior seemed highly problematic and seriously out of line with my beliefs about God's character. What was I to do with a story in which God reportedly drowned the entire human race except Noah and his family (Gen. 7:23)? What theological lesson was I to learn from God's genocidal decree that Saul utterly annihilate every last Amalekite, including "child and infant" (1 Sam. 15:2)? What sense was I to make of God's slaughter of seventy thousand people as punishment for a census that God had prompted David to take in the first place (2 Sam. 24:1, 15)? Nestled among the very same texts that had brought me such profound insights were passages which threatened to dismantle some of my most cherished beliefs. What was I to do?

I could have chosen simply to ignore these problematic passages. After all, that seems to be the way the church often "deals" with them. When was the last time you heard a sermon on God's attempt to kill Moses (Exod. 4:24-26)? Or, can you recall your Sunday school teacher ever getting out the flannelgraph board and placing hundreds of lifeless Egyptians along the shoreline, dead and bleeding, because God threw "horse and rider" into the sea (Exod. 14:30; 15:1)? Typically, these troubling images are not addressed in church. While some might be comfortable ignoring "problem passages" in this way, I was not. These portrayals were too pervasive, and their implications too problematic, to pretend they did not exist. Given the very real potential these problematic portrayals have of skewing one's view of God, I felt it was neither desirable nor prudent to act like the proverbial ostrich. Instead, I wanted to develop a responsible way of reading these texts that would value the Old Testament without encouraging false views of God. Therefore, I decided to address this problem directly.

My first concerted effort to do so came in the form of a Presidential Scholar's lecture at Messiah College titled "Reading the Old Testament without Losing Your Faith: Connecting Biblical Scholarship and Christian Belief." In that lecture, I emphasized the need to take the human origins of the Bible with full seriousness and to distinguish between the Bible's portrayals of God and God's true character. I also began discussing this topic in some of my classes and began giving related papers at professional conferences. Yet, given the complexities of this issue, I knew it was impossible to deal adequately with disturbing divine behavior in a single presentation or a few classroom conversations. Something more extensive was required.

My questions, concerns, and ideas on this topic have culminated in this present volume. They grow out of my own struggle with these troublesome texts and are guided by my respect for Scripture and my desire to use Scripture to think accurately about God. They are also motivated by a desire to help others who, like me, affirm the authority of Scripture yet sometimes struggle with certain Old Testament images of God. Writing this book has allowed me to examine more thoroughly disturbing divine behavior in Old Testament narratives and to propose a way of dealing with this in a theologically responsible manner.

The Importance of Thinking Rightly about God

A primary goal of this book is to help people know how to use Scripture to think as accurately as possible about God. The first chapter of A. W. Tozer's now classic book *The Knowledge of the Holy* bears the intriguing title "Why We Must Think Rightly about God." As Tozer sees it: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."⁵ Therefore, he argues that it is crucial "that our idea of God correspond as nearly as possible to the true being of God."⁶ This is important because the way we think about God strongly influences how we relate to God. As Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim puts it: "The images used to speak about God not only decisively determine the way one thinks about God, they have a powerful impact on the shape of the life of the believer."⁷ If we imagine God a demanding perfectionist or an absent father, these views undoubtedly will have an adverse effect on our relationship with God—if we choose to relate to God at all!⁸ On the other hand, if we believe God to be good and to have our best interests in mind, we are likely to maintain a life of faith regardless of what life throws our way.

Our view of God not only affects how we relate to God, it also influences our behavior. To illustrate this, consider how one's view of God influences one's perspective on a Christian's participation in war.⁹ Those who view God as the kind of being who sometimes uses violence to protect innocent lives or to liberate oppressed people are likely to support a Christian's participation in war, at least in certain circumstances. Their view of God may lead them to conclude that God sometimes commissions

Christians to fight—and even kill—in war, as regrettable as that may be. Yet other Christians, who view God as nonviolent, as one who suffers rather than inflicts injury, regard war as an evil that should be avoided at all costs. Their conception of God as one who rejects violence naturally leads them to believe they should do likewise. From their perspective, joining the military or participating in war are never appropriate options for Christians to consider. As this simple example illustrates, our view of God can have an enormous impact on how we behave. What we think about God really matters! So then, how can we be sure that our thoughts about God are accurate? What resources do we have at our disposal to help us think rightly about God?

Most Christians would immediately reference the Bible as their primary source of information about God. They would say that God is revealed in the pages of Scripture and that by diligent study we can know a lot about what God is really like. While this is true, it is not without certain difficulties. For example, when people use the Old Testament to learn about God's character, they may discover that God is sometimes described behaving in ways that they find troubling or that do not correspond very well to some of their ideas about how God acts. As Old Testament scholar John Barton observes:

Most Christians probably read the Old Testament to learn about God. They expect it to tell them what God is like, what he has done and what he requires of them. But those who approach the OT in this way are soon disappointed. They find that the God it shows them is, at best, something of a mixed blessing. Although at times he is loving, gentle and trustworthy, at others he seems capricious, harsh and unfeeling. . . . The information we get from the OT seems fairly ambiguous, and we would be hard put . . . to recognize in it the God in whom Jews or Christians now believe.¹⁰

This creates a real dilemma, causing considerable uncertainty about what to do with these images of God.

Who Should Read This Book?

As the prologue indicated, this book is for anyone who has encountered disturbing divine behavior in the Old Testament and wondered how to make sense of it. Therefore, I would expect this book to appeal to Christians from mainline denominations, people from other faith traditions, and even “nonbelievers” who simply want to know what to do with these problematic portrayals of God. I particularly hope that this volume will be read by theologically conservative Christians who may benefit considerably from it even as they find parts of it challenging. This volume should especially interest college and seminary students who are preparing for ministry, since they will surely be asked questions about God's behavior in the Old Testament. Similarly, religious professionals—clergy, professors, and the like—who feel

ill-equipped to deal responsibly with disturbing divine behavior will find this book very useful. Finally, this volume should point the way forward to those courageous readers who attempt to use the Bible as a resource for peacemaking but feel that God's actions in the Old Testament are an obstacle in this regard.

Old Testament Narratives

In order to provide some focus for this study, I have chosen to deal almost exclusively with problematic portrayals of God appearing in Old Testament narratives. Old Testament narrative, the primary genre through which the stories of the Old Testament are told, is concentrated in such books as Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. There we read some of the most well known Bible stories, including Noah and the ark, Abraham and the near sacrifice of Isaac, Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, Joshua and the battle of Jericho, and many, many others. And it is there, in those familiar stories, that we encounter some of the most troubling portrayals of God.

Obviously, the portrayals of God many readers find disturbing are not limited to Old Testament narratives or to a select handful of books. Instead, they appear throughout various genres in the Old Testament.¹¹ For instance, troubling images of God occur with some frequency in prophetic literature.¹² In fact, one might argue that some of the most provocative Old Testament examples of disturbing divine behavior are found in the Prophets. Still, I have chosen to limit this study to disturbing divine behavior found in Old Testament narratives for several reasons. First, many people are more familiar with Old Testament narrative than with prophetic literature. Since most readers of the Bible tend to know its stories better than its prophetic oracles, the images of God they find most disturbing will likely come from the narrative portions of the Old Testament. Second, dealing with disturbing divine behavior in prophetic literature requires a somewhat different discussion since a significant portion of it was first delivered orally and because it consists of poetry rather than prose. Third, focusing almost exclusively on the narrative portions of the Old Testament keeps this book within manageable proportions, and it seems better to concentrate on one genre rather than cover too much ground. Finally, many of the interpretive guidelines developed for dealing with disturbing divine behavior in narratives are easily transferrable to other portions of the Old Testament, not least of which the Prophets. For these reasons, it seemed prudent to restrict the parameters of this study to Old Testament narratives.

Qualms about Questioning God

Finding an adequate way to handle disturbing divine behavior in the Old Testament will require us to ask a series of rather sensitive questions: Do Old Testament

narratives record what actually happened? Must Israel's theological worldview be our own? Is the Bible's portrayal of God always trustworthy?¹³ In what sense is it appropriate to speak of the Bible being divinely inspired? These are big questions, and how they are answered has important and far-reaching implications. The answers I suggest to these kinds of questions will not always be the ones many readers bring to this book. For that reason, I would ask that you journey graciously with me in the following pages, remaining open to entertaining new insights and ideas as they are presented.

Many Christians have never been encouraged to pursue the kind of questions raised in this book. In fact, they have been taught just the opposite. Somewhere along the way, they have learned that it is wrong to question God, the Bible, or time-honored Christian beliefs. They have not been invited to ask hard questions or to openly discuss controversial issues. Those few brave souls who dare to speak up are commonly met with suspicion and defensiveness rather than genuine openness. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer relates an unfortunate episode from his youth that illustrates this point all too well.

As a teen, I experienced church as a place of deep friendships and bewildering theology. During confirmation classes, I occasionally asked questions outside the box. I wondered why a loving God would drown nearly all of humanity, why God allowed earthquakes, and why a baby who died before being baptized went to hell. Musing like these met a stern response from a pastor who essentially told me to shut up and memorize truths found in the Bible and tradition.¹⁴

Why should questions like these be forbidden in the Church? What better place is there to discuss important matters of Christian belief and biblical interpretation than among a community of Christians committed to following the life and teachings of Jesus? Rather than stifling such inquisitiveness, the Church should encourage it. The community of faith is precisely the place where people should be able to actively engage and creatively explore challenging questions.¹⁵ As Charles Kimball recognizes, demanding "blind obedience" to religious authorities is one of the warning signs that religion has become evil. Kimball writes: "Authentic religion encourages questions and reflection at all levels. When authority figures discourage or disallow honest questions, something clearly is wrong."¹⁶

Still, many church leaders feel quite uncomfortable dealing with questions like those asked by Nelson-Pallmeyer and like those we will explore in this book. When they are confronted by questions that cast doubt on their most basic assumptions about God and the Bible, they become combative rather than conversational. In doing so, they send a clear signal that these kinds of questions are unwelcome. The reason for this resistance varies from one church leader to another. Some, perceiving such questions as a challenge to their authority or to the Christian faith, quickly attempt to

squench them. Others are unsure how to respond to such questions since they themselves have never seriously wrestled with them. Even those with seminary degrees may find themselves struggling to handle questions about God's behavior in the Old Testament since this topic is not typically addressed in seminary classes. The Church's inability—and, at times, unwillingness—to constructively engage honest questions about these troubling images not only discourages people from asking such questions but sometimes gives the impression that doing so constitutes a lack of faith.

The Old Testament provides a better model, one that invites us to ask questions about God's behavior and to protest when we think God is acting inappropriately. In numerous Old Testament passages, we find people engaged in a feisty conversation with God about God's behavior. Abraham, for example, vigorously disapproves of God's plan to destroy the city of Sodom. He regards this divine plan as problematic because it threatens to wipe out the righteous along with the wicked (Gen. 18:23). Abraham objects to what he perceives as indiscriminate slaughter, asking God, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25b). Apparently, Abraham had no qualms about confronting God or questioning God's intentions when he had serious misgivings about the morality of what God intended to do.

Moses also protested when he heard of God's plan to destroy Israel right after Aaron made a golden calf and the people engaged in their wayward worship. God says, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation" (Exod. 32:9-10). But rather than meekly acquiescing to this divine declaration, Moses questions God's intentions.

But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people." (Exod. 32:11-12)

And guess what? God listens to Moses. We are told that "the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (Exod. 32:14).¹⁷ Moses vigorously objects to God's behavior and convincingly persuades God that destroying Israel is a bad idea.

Questions about God's behavior are also raised by the psalmist. Consider, for example, the following accusations of divine inactivity:

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Ps. 10:1)

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? (Ps. 13:1)

Apparently, the psalmist—and those who used these prayers—felt free to question God’s behavior (or lack thereof) when it did not correspond to what they believed to be true about God.¹⁸

Passages like these encourage us to ask questions about God’s behavior and to raise objections when that behavior appears morally or ethically problematic. While much more needs to be said about *how* to go about doing this, my point here is simply to reassure readers that there is nothing inherently wrong with raising questions about God’s behavior in the Old Testament. On the contrary, the precedent for such questioning exists in the Old Testament itself.¹⁹

The Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible?

Some readers may be unaware that debate surrounds the appropriateness of labeling the first part of the Bible “the Old Testament.” Quite apart from the problem of the adjective *old*, which has negative connotations for many readers, some object to this designation because it is a specifically Christian label. For example, it makes no sense for Jews to speak of an Old Testament since they do not regard the New Testament as authoritative. Instead, they refer to these writings as the *Tanak*, an acronym referring to the three major sections of the Hebrew Bible.²⁰ Many scholars—Christian and otherwise—simply use the designation “the Hebrew Bible” to refer to this collection of books. This religiously neutral designation, which reflects the primary language of these texts, is nonsectarian and avoids causing unnecessary offense.

That said, I have, nevertheless, opted to use the designation “Old Testament” throughout this study, since I am assuming my audience will consist largely of Christian readers who are comfortable with this label and who would find references to “the Hebrew Bible” awkward. Thus, my choice in using this descriptor is pragmatic and intends no disrespect for those who label it otherwise. Whether “the Old Testament” is an appropriate designation for the first part of the Bible is another debate for another time, and I hope I may be forgiven for not entering it here.²¹

A Brief Overview

Part 1 of the book, “Examining the Problem of Disturbing Divine Behavior,” consists of four chapters, each exploring the problem from a different angle. Chapter 1 analyzes numerous Old Testament passages that contain examples of disturbing divine behavior. These passages are categorized according to different kinds of divine behavior under such headings as “God as Instant Executioner,” “God as Mass Murderer,” “God as Divine Warrior,” and so on. The chapter presents the scope and severity of the problem in some detail.

Chapter 2 identifies various types of individuals—religious pacifists, Christian educators, feminists, and so on—who have been bothered by these images and

explores some of the images' negative impacts. Chapters 3 and 4 consider various ways people have responded to disturbing divine behavior in Old Testament narratives. Chapter 3 takes a historical look at some early expressions of discomfort with Old Testament images of God. Most notable is Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament and its God. This chapter also considers how the early church "saved" the Old Testament by appealing to such interpretive methods as typology and allegory. Since these methods are no longer regarded as appropriate for interpreting most of the Old Testament, chapter 4 discusses several contemporary "solutions" to the problem of disturbing divine behavior. Typically, these "solutions" try to explain and defend God's behavior. Ultimately, each approach discussed in this chapter is judged to be inadequate, prompting us to move in other directions in search of an appropriate response to problematic portrayals of God in the Old Testament.

The second part of the book, "Understanding the Nature of Old Testament Narratives," consists of four chapters that explore several interrelated issues crucial for dealing responsibly with disturbing divine behavior. Chapter 5 addresses the historicity of Old Testament narratives, challenging the popular assumption that everything the Bible reports actually happened. This opens the door for entertaining alternative possibilities for coming to terms with disturbing divine behavior in the Old Testament. Since this is such a sensitive issue for many Christians, chapter 6 responds to some of the objections raised by those who affirm the essential historicity of Old Testament narratives. This chapter also discusses some of the often overlooked dangers of demanding that everything (or most everything) in the Old Testament is historically accurate.

The conclusions reached in chapters 5 and 6 raise another question: If certain things did not happen as the Old Testament describes them, why have they been portrayed this way? Chapters 7 and 8 respond to that question. Chapter 7 considers what motivated Israelite historiographers (history writers) to write these stories in the first place. Among other things, it discusses how ancient writers routinely used the past to address a variety of issues in the present rather than for purely antiquarian interests. It considers some potential reasons for writing one of the most troubling texts in the Old Testament, the conquest narrative in Joshua 6–11. Chapter 8 introduces readers to several theological worldview assumptions commonly held by people in the ancient Near East. These assumptions—such as the belief that God/the gods fought for or against people in battle, and that God/the gods rewarded the righteous and punished the wicked in the here and now—influenced the way Israelites shaped their stories. Identifying these theological beliefs helps us understand *why* God was portrayed in certain ways in the Old Testament. Having a better knowledge of the nature of Old Testament narratives prepares the way for the interpretive guidelines offered in the final section.

The last part of the book, "Developing Responsible Readings of Troublesome Texts," builds on the previous discussion and provides readers with specific guidance

for dealing responsibly with disturbing divine behavior in Old Testament narratives. Chapter 9 makes the case for the need to distinguish between the textual and actual God when reading the Old Testament. The importance of doing so is illustrated by an extended discussion of one of the most notoriously troubling passages in the entire Old Testament, the story of the Amalekite genocide in 1 Samuel 15.

Suggesting that we make distinctions between the textual and actual God inevitably raises the question of how we go about doing so. On what basis can these distinctions be made? That is the focus of chapters 10 and 11. The christo-centric hermeneutic I develop in chapter 10 provides the basis for making these all-important distinctions between the textual and actual God. I argue that the God Jesus reveals should be the standard by which all other portrayals of God are evaluated. Old Testament portrayals that correspond to the God Jesus revealed can be trusted as reliable reflections of God's character, while those that fall short should be regarded as distortions of the same. Chapter 11 develops guidelines for using passages containing disturbing divine behavior in theologically constructive ways. People are encouraged to become discerning readers who employ a dual hermeneutic that allows them to reject certain Old Testament portrayals as unworthy of God without regarding the passages in which they reside as theologically useless. In this way, I attempt to demonstrate the enduring value of Old Testament narratives despite the problematic portrayals of God contained in many of them.

The final chapter of the book, chapter 12, is programmatic in nature. It offers general suggestions for how the church should deal with disturbing divine behavior in the Old Testament. A portion of this chapter is specifically designed to help religious professionals, including pastors and professors who preach and teach from these challenging texts and who regularly need to answer difficult questions students and parishioners ask about them.

The book concludes with a relatively brief afterword and two appendices. Appendix A responds to certain objections that might be raised to an assertion I make in chapter 10 about Jesus revealing a God who is nonviolent. The primary focus here is on how to deal with Jesus' comments about eschatological (end time) divine violence, which some believe contradict that assertion. Appendix B discusses the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Since this book inevitable raises questions about the nature and function of Scripture, it seemed necessary to address these matters. While some readers will undoubtedly need to rethink their view of Scripture in order to embrace the interpretive approach offered in this book, I maintain there is no inherent contradiction between utilizing this approach *and* affirming Scripture's inspiration and authority.