

## THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SACRALIZED VIOLENCE IN THE EXODUS AND CONQUEST

MATTHEW ROWLEY\*

### I. THE DANGEROUS WILL OF GOD

How would someone know that God really commanded a Holy War, that the almighty Deity asked them to participate in exacting judgment on another human?<sup>1</sup> As justification for this belief, this person might utter three of the most dangerous words in all of history, “God wills it.” Man has always felt a need to justify his actions by an appeal to the Deity, even if that Supreme Being is Reason. He can ground his actions in an external divine command or in the internal *will to power*. When read side by side, some of the commands of Muhammad, bin Laden, and Moses sound eerily similar. Violence is common to every faith system (even atheism and secularism),<sup>2</sup> and there is an “embarrassment of riches” when it comes to

---

\* Matthew Rowley is a pastoral intern at Jubilee Community Church, 3245 16th Ave S., Minneapolis, MN 55407.

<sup>1</sup> The aim of this paper is to help the reader approach the Bible nonviolently by helping him or her to read the Hebrew Bible epistemologically. This paper makes two assumptions about the biblical text, and the reader is being asked to accept these assumptions for the sake of argument. In return for accepting these assumptions the main thesis of this paper can be used by someone of any theological persuasion to discredit modern-day violence done in the name of God. The first assumption is that the biblical text accurately represents history; and second, the Bible tells a coherent story. The reader is being asked to assume the truth of the biblical narrative *partly because* the individual or nation that kills in God’s name assumes this. Also, when I say something like “God has not willed that,” I mean that the person has not received special revelation commanding violence like the characters in the Bible did. It is also not within the scope of this paper to deal in detail with the ethics and characteristics of Yahweh War. For different perspectives on this, I would recommend Michael Bergmann, Michael Murray, and Michael Rea, *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Walter Brueggemann, *Divine Presence Amid Violence: Contextualizing the Book of Joshua* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009); Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); Peter Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Wipf & Stock, 2000); Eric Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Heath Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan, eds., *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and an Old Testament Problem* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 73–108.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Charles Kimball claims in his introduction that religion is responsible for more violence than any other “institutional force in human history” (Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002] 1). William Cavanaugh summarizes, “Kimball identifies five ‘warning signs’ of when a religion is apt to turn evil... Religion is likely to turn violent when it displays any of these features: absolute truth claims, blind obedience, the establishment of an ‘ideal’ time, the belief that the end justifies the means, and the declaration of holy war.” However, as Cavanaugh rightly comments, “If the five warning signs also apply to secular ideologies, why not frame the [argument] as an analysis of the circumstances under which *any* institution or ideology becomes evil?” (William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* [New York: Oxford University Press,

fuel within the Bible that could be seized as justification for sacralized violence in present-day conflicts.<sup>3</sup> I sympathize with Christopher Hitchens's assessment that "religion poisons everything,"<sup>4</sup> even though a more accurate statement would be that "people poison everything."<sup>5</sup>

Does the Hebrew Bible give us any help in condemning present-day violence done in the name of God?<sup>6</sup> Can the violent texts help us reach a nonviolent reading in the present day?<sup>7</sup> Clearly, in the pages of the Hebrew Bible, God commanded violence as an expression of obedience to his will.<sup>8</sup>

The first half of this paper aims to establish the epistemology of sacralized violence in the exodus and conquest. The second half demonstrates how this applies to the conquest as proclaimed through Moses and carried out by Joshua. In the conclusion, the epistemology of sacralized violence will be used to critique the claims of those who invoke God's will as a justification in present-day violence. I will argue that these people cannot imitate the violent commands of the conquest because they have not experienced the miraculous context of the conquest.

1. *Atheism, ethics, and the will of God.* Christopher Hitchens and Doug Wilson have both strongly defended the claim that anything is ethically permissible if the other person's belief system is true.<sup>9</sup> Hitchens claims that if there is an all-powerful God, then he can decree anything—thus making anything permissible if there is a God. Wilson has argued that if atheism is true, then there is no foundation for mo-

2009] 21–24; cf. 1–56. Further, Cavanaugh notes how groundless claims are that religion is responsible for unprecedented evil. He notes how most governments throughout history had no sacred/secular divide. Therefore, it could also be said that politics is responsible for more violence than any other "institutional force in human history." But this begs the question. "Politics as opposed to what?" (ibid. 61; cf. 81–82). Since all pre-Enlightenment human institutions were theo-political institutions, why do people like Kimball single out religion as the cause of the majority of evil?

<sup>3</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses* (New York: HarperOne, 2012) 6. Strictly speaking, "books don't kill people." John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 1. See also John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas, the Bible, and the Legitimation of Violence," in *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, vol. 1, *Sacred Scriptures, Ideology, and Violence* (ed. J. Harold Ellens; Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004) 11.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Doug Wilson, "Wet Streets Cause Rain," accessed December 28, 2012, <http://www.dougwils.com/God-Is-Not-Great/Wet-Streets-Cause-Rain.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) 61–92. I do not agree with some of Seibert's or Jenkins's assumptions or methods, but I do agree with their desire that the Bible not be used to justify violence in the present day.

<sup>7</sup> I consider a nonviolent reading of the text to be one where historical accounts are not used as justification or inspiration in present-day conflicts. I still believe that warfare and violence are necessary in extreme circumstances. The warfare attitude spectrum usually looks like this: Holy War – Just War – Pacifism. I would place myself in between Just War and Pacifism, because I am critical of much of what has happened in "just wars," and I do not see complete pacifism as a realistic option at the present time.

<sup>8</sup> I have not done the research on the following statistics firsthand. It is estimated that there are over six hundred violent verses in the Bible, over one hundred commands to kill, and more than one thousand verses where Yahweh is personally involved in executing judgment. If the scriptural accounts of violence are ignored, then huge sections of the Bible must be ignored. Statistics quoted in Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011) 10.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Hitchens and Doug Wilson, *COLLISION: Christopher Hitchens vs. Douglas Wilson* (LEVEL4, 2009), DVD.

rality in the first place—therefore, anything is permissible if there is no God. Who is right?

Wilson's point has been persuasively argued by an atheist, Arthur Leff, in a famous lecture entitled, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law."<sup>10</sup> Hitchens's point has been argued by Meredith Kline, a theologian, who made the case for *Intrusion Ethics*. Kline wrote, "The welfare of man is not the chief end of man. . . . we sinful creatures have no inherent rights which our holy Maker must respect. . . . God may, without violating any obligation, take any man's life at any time and in any way."<sup>11</sup> Hitchens's argument appears firmly grounded as well. It seems that the case could be made that anything is permissible with God (or gods) and anything is permissible without God. However, there is one major distinction that makes Hitchens's position incompatible with real, enforceable ethics.

If there is no God, then there is no real foundation for right and wrong or for human rights.<sup>12</sup> Every man is a law unto himself. If there is no God, "all moral judgements [are] statements about the speaker's feelings mistaken by him for statements about something else (the real moral quality of actions) which does not exist."<sup>13</sup> Ethics rests on the idea of "ought" and "ought not." And these obligations "cannot be logically deduced from the environment and physical experiences of man."<sup>14</sup>

In a biblical worldview, ethics are founded on the character of God and are made known to man through revelation. Man is not permitted to do anything *per se*,

<sup>10</sup> "We are never going to get anywhere (assuming for the moment that there is somewhere to get) in ethical or legal theory unless we finally face the fact that, in the Psalmist's words, there is no one like unto the Lord. If He does not exist, there is no metaphoric equivalent. No person, no combination of people, no document however hallowed by time, no process, no premise, nothing is equivalent to an actual God in this central function as the unexamined examiner of good and evil. The so-called death of God turns out not to have been just *His* funeral; it also seems to have effected the total elimination of any coherent, or even more-than-momentarily convincing, ethical or legal system dependent upon finally authoritative extrasystemic premises. . . . The result of that realization is what might be called an exhilarated vertigo, a simultaneous combination of an exultant 'We're free of God' and a despairing 'Oh God, we're free.'" Arthur A. Leff, "Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law" (1979. *Faculty Scholarship Series*. Paper 2826) 1232–33, accessed August 17, 2012, online at [http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss\\_papers/2826](http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/2826).

<sup>11</sup> Meredith G. Kline, "The Intrusion and the Decalogue," *WTJ* 16 (1953) 13.

<sup>12</sup> Here are two modern resources wrestling with ethics and human rights from a nontheistic grounding. Simon Blackburn, *Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Ari Kohen, *In Defense of Human Rights: A Non-Religious Grounding in a Pluralistic World* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2007). They argue for basing rights on consensus. A consensus can agree that gold has value, but consensus does not make gold intrinsically valuable. For a theistic grounding of human rights, see Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Part of the problem for Christians comes from the fact that the God who gives people worth also commands that people be killed. If we give up the idea of the biblical God, then we give up the *imago Dei*. If we give up the *imago Dei*, then we give up inherent or conferred human worth. If we give up human worth, then we give up human worth violations (since a worthless thing cannot be violated). If we give up human worth violations, then there is no real enforceable wrong done by a human to another human. Therefore, if we are to hold on to our idea of human worth, we must run to, not away from the God of the Bible, even when his commands seem to violate human worth.

<sup>13</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2000) 57.

<sup>14</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 10–11.

since God has decreed that man *ought to do* some things and *ought not to do* other things. However, as Meredith Kline argued, God could command a different expression of obedience to the ultimate ethic which is obedience to Yahweh.<sup>15</sup> God could command that a particular individual do an act that is different from the normative ethic that is binding on the rest of humanity. Examples appear to be when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and when God commanded the conquest of Canaan.

If God can decree different expressions of the ultimate ethic, if that decree is made known through revelation, and if that revelation comes through a human mouthpiece, then how can I know which mouthpiece accurately speaks for God? Most would agree that if there is a God who reveals himself, it is of utmost importance that people accept real messages from him and reject false ones. Central to this essay is the belief that *God desired to safeguard against the misunderstanding of his will: therefore he chose to validate new knowledge with miracles.*

Below are two arguments that get at the thesis of this paper. Syllogism 1 represents the view that God grants special knowledge (almost on par with prophetic revelation) to the present-day Christian. If a respected Christian leader tells you that “God is on the side of our military,” how do you know whether or not God truly spoke to him? One example is when it was believed that God sanctioned the Crusades. The crowd replied for the call to arms chanting “*Deus vult*” (Latin for “God wills it”).<sup>16</sup> If it is assumed that God’s primary mode of revelation is through visions or spoken word, which are subjective, then there is no way to distinguish between true revelations and fake ones.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> In answer to the Euthyphro dilemma, I believe that *good* is part of God’s nature. His commands come out of his nature, and they create an obligation on the part of moral agents. For humans, *right* is conformity to the decree of God, and *wrong* is lack of conformity to it. The ultimate ethic is obedience to God.

<sup>16</sup> Rodney Stark, *God’s Battalions: The Case for the Crusades* (New York: HarperOne, 2010) 107, 156–58, 176–77, 240. For a treatment of sacralized violence in U.S. history, see Peter J. Leithart, *Between Babel and Beast: America and Empires in Biblical Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012) 57–152.

<sup>17</sup> This point is particularly relevant for evangelicals who love sensing God’s personal, special will for their lives. Stanford sociologist Tanya Luhrmann notes a contradiction in evangelical thought. Evangelicals who claim to know the will of God say that their subjective revelation from the Holy Spirit cannot contradict God’s revealed will in Scripture. However, as Luhrmann notes, God seems to change the ethical expression of obedience within the very pages of Scripture. She rightly cites the sacrifice of Isaac as evidence (Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* [New York: Knopf, 2012] 64).

<b>Chart 1</b>
If God changed the ethical expression of obedience in the past (Abraham/Conquest/Jesus' commands to nonviolence), then he could <i>theoretically</i> do so again in the present.
If that change comes through a subjective sensing of God's will ...
If that subjective sensing cannot be verified by the individual or by an onlooker ...
Then there is no way to know if the individual was really called by God to a different expression of ethical obedience. There is, as Kierkegaard argued in <i>Fear and Trembling</i> , no difference in the eyes of the onlooker between the faithful man and the madman.

However, the Bible presents a safeguard, thus validating what is truly God's will. When there was new revelation commanding that man must take the life of another man (hereafter called "life-taking obedience"), God chose to unite new knowledge with miracles. Argument 2 shows this.

<b>Chart 2</b>
If God changed the ethical expression of obedience in the past (Abraham/Conquest/Jesus' commands to nonviolence), then he could <i>theoretically</i> do so again in the present.
If that change comes through the declaration of the messenger of God <i>and is validated by individual and communal miracles</i> (multiple, large-scale miracles) ...
Then this subjective and communal <i>sensing</i> can be verified by the individual or an onlooker (e.g. the crossing of the Jordan validated Joshua's message, see Josh 3:7) ...
Then there is a solid foundation based on the pattern of the Bible that helps onlookers know whether the messenger was really "called by God" to a <i>different expression of obedience</i> to Yahweh.

The Bible describes a God who cares about distinguishing his revelation from counterfeits. He desires that we *know that we know* his will, which leads us to a discussion of epistemology.

2. *Knowledge and the will of God.* Before examining the possibility of knowing God's will, we must explore the ability of our cognitive faculties to rightly interpret the world because "all possible knowledge depends on the validity of reasoning."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, *Miracles* 21. For a discussion of the "current understanding of human perception informed by the disciplines of cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, neuropsychology, and neurology," see Joanna Collicutt's chapter entitled "The Psychology of Perception" found in Alistair McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) 80–111.

Naturalistic explanations cannot get past Darwin's "horrid doubt" that blind processes aimed at survival only arrive at truth if that truth aids in survival.<sup>19</sup> The Bible assumes that God created people who can know many things about their world and that much of this knowledge comes through sense-experience.<sup>20</sup> How we already perceive reality constructs an "epistemic framework" for how we interpret new events.<sup>21</sup> Ancients and moderns have always had "plausibility paradigms" through which they filtered out unbelievable experiences or messages.<sup>22</sup> The validity of a sacralized war rests on people knowing that it is truly God's will to take up arms. How is the soldier in Moses' army to know with confidence that his leader speaks for God? I will now turn to a discussion of the view that miracles are a revelation of Yahweh's person and a validation of his messenger.

3. *Miracles and the Will of God.* Most people today follow the prevailing view of the Enlightenment and David Hume by looking on any miraculous claims with suspicion.<sup>23</sup> Before examining the validating role of miracles, I must first answer two objections to the belief that miracles are not possible: 1) either God excludes miracles, or 2) the natural system excludes miracles.<sup>24</sup> The second objection rests entirely on faith: can it really be proven that nothing can break into our natural order?<sup>25</sup> Science is only equipped to tell us what normally happens—it cannot ul-

---

<sup>19</sup> Charles Darwin, *Letter to William Graham, 3 July 1881*, accessed December 17, 2012, online at <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-13230>. Alvin Plantinga writes, "suppose you are a naturalist: you think that there is no such person as God, and that we and our cognitive faculties have been cobbled together by natural selection. Can you then sensibly think that our cognitive faculties are for the most part reliable? I say you can't. The basic idea of my argument could be put (a bit crudely) as follows. First, the probability of our cognitive faculties being reliable, given naturalism and evolution, is low.... [Second,] if I believe both naturalism and evolution, I have a *defeater* for my intuitive assumption that my cognitive faculties are reliable. If I have a defeater for *that* belief, however, then I have a defeater for *any* belief I take to be produced by my cognitive faculties. [The belief in both evolution and naturalism] shoots itself in the foot and is self-referentially incoherent; therefore I cannot rationally accept it." Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 313–14.

<sup>20</sup> "Now the natural thing to think, from the perspective of theism, is that our faculties are indeed for the most part reliable, at least over a large part of their range of operations" (Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* 313). Also, you can set the criteria for knowledge so high that nothing can be believed, or set the bar so low with the result that everything is believed. See David L. Wolfe, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 43–69. See also John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987) 65. This, of course, does not mean that new events could not correct a preexisting framework. Someone could believe in a good God, filtering all their experiences through that framework, and then change their mind when Hurricane Katrina struck.

<sup>21</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) 98.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 96. For the pervasiveness of intellectual dissent in antiquity see Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Hume's certitude that miracles do not happen is ironic given his philosophical skepticism. For a discussion on this and on his circular reasoning with regard to the impossibility of miracles, see Lewis, *Miracles* 159–71; and Keener, *Miracles* 107–70.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, *Miracles* 71.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 107.

timately prove that nature is a closed system.<sup>26</sup> In regards to the first objection, the Bible describes a God who can and does employ miracles.<sup>27</sup> Any rejection of the possibility of miracles rests on *a priori* assumptions which are “hardly neutral.”<sup>28</sup>

The Bible presents no bifurcation between God’s miracles in nature (i.e. creation and sustaining natural processes, etc.) and his special interventions in space and time.<sup>29</sup> In epistemology, it is generally believed that people can *know something* about the world in which they live. If a miracle happened, how would a person know its validity? The Bible often claims large, communal, frequent, long-lasting, multi-sensory miracles. Pagan revelations are usually subjective and could be easily faked.<sup>30</sup> Miracles can appeal to many types of validation. Generally speaking, communal experience is more reliable than subjective experience;<sup>31</sup> experiences involving all the senses are better than experiences that only engage one sense; experiences that are verified by people from different locations and worldviews are more reliable than experiences that come from a myopic group; and experiences that are enduring in time and effect are more reliable than experiences that are short in duration and fading in effect. In sum, the stronger the evidence, the more justification a person has for believing that a sensed miraculous experience actually accords with reality.

Even though there is no divide in the source of the miracles, there is a difference in what a human can learn from these miracles. I propose to categorize the epistemic value of miracles as follows. *Category 1* miracles are the miracles that we call the Laws of Nature. God is the Creator and Sustainer of everything, and his handiwork is miraculous. I can learn much about God from this miraculous world. However, I cannot learn that God chose Moses as his mouthpiece from the orderliness and beauty of creation. These specific revelations come through *Category 2* miracles that are “*qualitatively* special divine action.”<sup>32</sup> *Category 2* miracles can be

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 71–85.

<sup>27</sup> Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* 68.

<sup>28</sup> Keener, *Miracles*, 83, 97.

<sup>29</sup> “There is no concept of a ‘natural’ world in ancient Near Eastern thinking. The dichotomy between natural and supernatural is a relatively recent one. . . . There is nothing ‘natural’ about the world in biblical theology, nor should there be in ours” (John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009] 18, 20; cf. 114, 133, 142).

<sup>30</sup> I will argue for this in more detail later. All ancient cultures claim that the gods are involved in ordinary affairs (especially political and military events). The OT and NT claim that revelation is vindicated by miracles in a way that is unparalleled in the ancient literature available. Even though the Bible claims some subjective miracles (“Thus says the Lord”), they should be believed because of the other miracles that could not be faked (crossing the Sea). For an Egyptian comparison, see John D. Currid, “Knowing the Will of the Gods: Divine Intervention in Ancient Egypt” (paper delivered at ETS annual meeting, November 14, 2012). For an ANE comparison see, James K. Hoffmeier, “‘These Things Happened’: Why a Historical Exodus Is Essential for Theology” and John W. Hilber, “The Culture of Prophecy and Writing in the Ancient Near East,” in James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary, eds., *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012) 99–134, 219–42. For a NT comparison, see Keener, *Miracles* 35–82.

<sup>31</sup> I will address objections to this point in a later footnote.

<sup>32</sup> C. John Collins, *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God’s Action In the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000) 87. Plantinga writes, “God regularly causes events in the world. Divine action of this

placed on an epistemic spectrum of 2-, 2, 2+. *Category 2-* miracles (a vision, dream, or small-scale event) do not carry much epistemic weight because they could be easily misinterpreted or faked. *Category 2+* miracles (crossing the Sea, decades of manna) carry more epistemic weight, are harder to misinterpret, and are impossible to fake. These miracles “make God’s presence more noticeable” and aid in arriving at a proper interpretation of God’s will.<sup>33</sup> *Category 2* miracles are smaller miracles that go against the normal pattern of nature (subjective, myopic, local, single sensory, single event, spontaneous). These miracles may be faked or easily misinterpreted and appeal to less epistemic validation even though they still have some weight. *Category 2+* miracles are large-scale miracles that appeal to greater epistemic validation (communal, multiethnic, widespread, multi-sensory, multi-event, prophesied in detail). The chart below shows the epistemic value of *Category 2* miracle claims.

Chart 3: Spectrum of the Epistemic Value of Miracle Claims			
Category	2-	2	2+
Claim	“God talked to me in a bush”	“God made bitter water sweet”	“God fed us for decades with magic bread”
Epistemic Value	Lesser	Moderate	Greater
Conclusion	I should doubt this claim	I should hold this experience loosely	I should trust this

*Category 2-*, *2*, and *2+* miracles are unnecessary to God’s story. In the exodus narrative, God could have softened Pharaoh’s heart and made him decree that all the Israelites were free to go. But if he had done this, the people of Israel might not have known (through a prophet or through other means) that God was the one who worked this redemption for them. Instead, God chose to go to war with Pharaoh and all of Egypt with the result that national Israel glorified God and increased in knowledge about him. Exodus 9:15–16 reads, “For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you [Pharaoh] and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth” (cf. Rom 9:17).

In these verses Moses, speaking as the mouthpiece of Yahweh, is to tell Pharaoh that God is going to inflict another plague so that it would be known that Yahweh is the supreme God. Then God goes into an explanation as to why there are to be so many plagues. God could have given all of the Egyptians a deadly sick-

---

sort is action beyond creation and conservation; we could think of it as *special* divine action” (*Where the Conflict Really Lies* 68).

<sup>33</sup> C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006) 273.



ness after an Egyptian cultic meal, one from which the Jews would have been excluded. However, God desired that the people of Israel (and by extension other nations) should *know that they knew him*. Pharaoh's rise to power and his sudden downfall were all for the purpose that God's name would be famous. The miracles were unnecessary because God could have rescued them through *Category 1* miraculous events, but instead he chose to display himself mightily so that people would glean the God-intended lesson from the exodus, that there is no one like Yahweh (Exod 15:11–12).<sup>34</sup>

4. *A critical approach to the will of God.* Having examined the knowledge of God's will in relation to ethics, epistemology, and miracles, this paper will now propose two steps that will help the Christian approach the Bible's violent texts nonviolently. These steps also provide the foundation from which present day sacralized violence can be critiqued and condemned.

a. *Reading biblical history critically.* Adam and Eve were created by the hand of God, placed in paradise, and given unmistakable commands. For them, these commands came from the only being to whom they had ever spoken. There were no other competing truth claims. In Genesis 3, the serpent entered and challenged the goodness and authority of God's word by asking, "Did God actually say?" Since the fall, there has been a marketplace of ideas where there are countless claims to a true word from God. Because this is the real state of the world, questioning someone who claims to speak for God is not only right but necessary.<sup>35</sup> Ironically, someone who is truly concerned with truth must ask the same question as the serpent. This involves reading the texts critically. To do this, the modern reader must picture himself as a character in the story who really wants to make sure that he is not duped by someone claiming to speak for God. In this paper, the skeptic I am imagining is one who is standing in the army of Moses.<sup>36</sup> I have a his-

<sup>34</sup> There are some philosophers and theologians who try to explain the miracles of the exodus in purely naturalistic terms. The quantity, quality, repetition, and rapid succession of the miracles claimed in the text makes this position untenable. For a summary of this approach and a few examples of naturalistic explanations, see Collins, *God of Miracles* 27–29.

<sup>35</sup> I am not advocating an unhealthy and unproductive form of skepticism that doubts everything but skepticism. See Dick Keyes, *Seeing Through Cynicism: A Reconsideration of the Power of Suspicion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006) 75–88. A helpful term for what I am after is "critical fideism." This approach understands the necessity and limits of faith, but also the necessity and limits of critically evaluating truth claims. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 161. See also Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> There is always the risk that individuals and groups can be self-deceived. See James S. Spiegel, *Hypocrisy: Moral Fraud and Other Vices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 45–67. Also, the objection could be made that the soldiers obeyed because of authority pressure (Milgram experiment on obedience to authority figures), a mistaken belief that God ordained the leader (*Führerprinzip*), peer pressure (Asch conformity experiments), the distorting effect of role play (Stanford prison experiment), or because of groupthink. Could one of these factors account for Israel's obedience? First, I am arguing that the higher miraculous validation goes, the smaller the chances are of choosing the wrong leader, being self-deceived, or wrongly succumbing to groupthink and peer pressure. The more epistemic validation given, the less chance there is that the Israelites suffer (to borrow a phrase from Richard Dawkins) from a *God delusion*. Second, Israel's very lives depended on the realness of the miracles claimed by Moses (manna).

torical aid that helps me visualize this skeptical soldier. The photo is of a Nazi rally where the crowd is performing the Nazi salute.<sup>37</sup> In the middle of the crowd stands one man, with his arms skeptically crossed. I then transport that image to the biblical text and imagine a skeptic in Moses' audience. He asks the question, "Why should I believe that you speak for God?" and is looking for reasons *to doubt* Moses.

b. *Reading biblical history epistemologically.* Reading the text epistemologically is the other side of the same coin. Here the soldier asks, "Why should I believe that you speak for God?" while looking for reasons *to believe*. This allows the skeptical soldier to examine the evidence so that he can determine the validity of the claim. The next section makes the textual argument that Moses and Joshua were to be believed because of the miracles God performed through them.

## II. MIRACLES AND THE BELIEVABILITY OF MOSES AND JOSHUA

1. *Miracles confirm authority and ground obligation.* What were the Israelites, and by extension the Israelite soldiers, to learn as a result of the miracles at the exodus?<sup>38</sup> First, they were to learn that Yahweh is supreme above all gods in power and authority. Second, they were to learn that Moses was the representative who acted "like God" before Egypt and Israel (Exod 7:1). Moses was also to be like God to Aaron (Exod 4:16) and the rest of the people. The miracles were meant to validate that the God of Abraham was really speaking through him (Exod 4:6–9). As a result of the miracles, Israel "believed in the LORD *and in his servant Moses*" (Exod 14:30–31; cf. Exod 19:9; Deut 34:10–12). The miracles of judgment on Egypt and her gods validated Moses and his message.<sup>39</sup> Many of the Egyptians esteemed Moses (Exod 3:21; 11:3), and some chose to attach themselves to Israel (Exod 12:36–38). Pharaoh and the Egyptians learned firsthand that *Moses was like God* to them.

The people also confirmed Moses' unique role when they shrank back from God's direct revelation at Sinai (Deut 5:23–27). They experienced a "staggeringly

Groupthink could cause someone to believe that they ate a few miraculous meals or that bitter water tasted sweet; however, groupthink could not keep a country fed for decades. For a treatment of many of these aforementioned phenomena, see Rachel M. MacNair, *The Psychology of Peace: An Introduction* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003) 1–56. Even though many books written by sociologists or psychoanalysts of religious violence are helpful in assessing violence done in the name of God, I remain convinced that they do not deal with the actual miracle claims made in the text. As a result, they fail to understand the reasons given in the text for the actions that were taken. See James W. Jones, *Blood that Cries Out from the Earth: The Psychology of Religious Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000); Jerry S. Piven, "On the Psychosis (Religion) of Terrorists" in *The Psychology of Terrorism*, vol. 3: *Theoretical Understandings and Perspectives* (ed. Chris Stout; Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002); Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); and the four volumes edited by J. Harold Ellens, *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Wolfgang Benz, *A Concise History of the Third Reich* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006) 122.

<sup>38</sup> Appeals to experiential knowledge that is often to be passed on to subsequent generations: Exod 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 10:2; 11:7; 14:4, 18; 16:6, 12; 18:10–11; 29:46; 31:13; Lev 23:43; Num 12:4–8; 14:31–34; 16:28–30; Deut 4:9, 35, 39; 7:7–11, 15; 8:3–6; 9:2–8; 11:2; 29:4–6, 16; 31:11–13.

<sup>39</sup> Keener, *Miracles* 57–64. There is an "authenticating function [to] miracles."

awesome audio-visual experience of the presence and power of God, and it burned into the collective memory of Israel forever after.”<sup>40</sup> God spoke to Moses in a cloud “so that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe *in you forever*” (Exod 19:9). These words of Moses that the people are to obey consist in covenant promises, food regulations, judicial rulings, warfare practices, case laws, etc. Moses should be obeyed in all these matters because he is the one who led the Israelites through the Sea. The visible presence of God in their midst made Moses unique in the eyes of the people and made Israel unique in the sight of the nations (Exod 33:15–16).

The first words of the Decalogue support the claim that miracles affirm the believability of both Yahweh and Moses: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6). This important verse tells the reader multiple things. Of import here is the fact that Moses should be believed when he says the Ten Words are from God because the messenger is the one who actually led them out of Egypt. History is employed to ground obligation.<sup>41</sup> The miracles not only validate Yahweh, but they also validate Moses as the mouthpiece of Yahweh.

The construction “I am the LORD” or “who brought you out of Egypt” occurs around one hundred times in Exodus-Deuteronomy. It usually occurs in conjunction with a command. In a sense, the crossing of the Sea and the miracles before it are used as collateral for obedience in the present (Num 14:11).<sup>42</sup> In Leviticus, the grounding for many commands is simply “I am the LORD.”<sup>43</sup> I take this construction to be shorthand for the full phrase, which also includes “who brought you out of Egypt.” Evidence for this is found in the fact that at key narrative seams the full statement is included (Lev 19:35–37).<sup>44</sup> What does all of this mean? The author of Psalm 105 rightly understands that all of God’s actions through Moses

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Wright, *Knowing God the Father through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007) 43: “Sinai was the greatest of all Old Testament theophanies... God was heard (in the sound of thunder, the trumpet and the voice), felt (in an earthquake) and seen (in smoke and fire)... Sinai was an experience of intelligible, meaningful communication.”

<sup>41</sup> It also grounds obedience throughout the rest of the OT. James K. Hoffmeier, “These Things Happened” 114–32.

<sup>42</sup> I have not figured out the exact number and I do not want to fall into the “word/concept” fallacy. More research is needed here. What follows is a sampling of texts that show that the exodus grounds both obedience to the command and the believability of the one giving the command: Exod 12:17, 42; 13:7–9, 14–18; 16:6–8; 20:2; 22:21; 23:9, 15; 29:46; Lev 11:45; 19:34, 36; 22:31–33; 23:43; 25:42, 55; 26:13; Num 3:13; 8:17; 15:40–41; Deut 1:29–33; 4:19–20, 32–40; 5:6, 15; 6:12, 21–25; 8:14; 10:19; 11:1–7; 13:10; 15:15; 16:1–6; 20:1; 24:22; 26:1–10; 29:1–9.

<sup>43</sup> For example, see Lev 18:5, 30; 19:4, 12, 14, 17, 25, 28, 30, 31; cf. Num 3:13, 41, 45; 10:10.

<sup>44</sup> One example is in Leviticus 18–19. Obedience is repeatedly grounded in “I am the LORD” (18:2, 4, 5, 6, 21, 30; 19:3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 18, 25, 28, 31, 32). This section concludes with the full statement “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (19:35–37). I see the construction like this: Commands + I am the LORD, commands + I am the LORD, commands + I am the LORD, then at the end of a section the text reads “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” I see more significance in this phrase than Michael Waltzer, but he is right in noting that these grounded laws, what he calls “laws-with-reasons,” are distinctive when compared with other ANE law codes (*In God’s Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012] 26–30).

were meant to ground obedience and support faith.<sup>45</sup> A large percentage of the commands in Exodus-Deuteronomy are grounded in the exodus event. For example, the command for an active conquest is grounded in a passive exodus that they personally experienced. In the future, the people are not to fear the inhabitants of the land because the same God who was victorious over the Egyptians will give them victory (Deut 7:17–26). The questioning soldier should believe in Moses and his commands because of the miraculous epistemological currency placed in his trust bank at the exodus.<sup>46</sup>

The Israelites who experienced the exodus firsthand were charged to pass along to the next generation the things that their eyes saw (Exod 12:26; 13:14; Deut 6:4–9, 20–25; 11:19–20; Josh 4:21).<sup>47</sup> They were to pass along something they experienced as history, not something they were taught as mythology. This is where their knowledge of God was rooted.<sup>48</sup>

Moses was the mouthpiece through whom the violent commands of the Bible first came. After he died, Joshua became the leader who led the people to war. Why should a soldier in Joshua's army believe Joshua when he commands seemingly suicidal warfare tactics at Jericho?<sup>49</sup> The same pattern that validated Moses continues with Joshua. As the Israelites are about to cross the Jordan, God says, "Today I will begin to exalt you [Joshua] in the sight of all Israel, *that they may know*, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you" (Josh 3:7; cf. 1:5, 9). The Jordan episode caused

<sup>45</sup> For example, Ps 105:23–45 summarizes the whole exodus and wanderings. There is a string of 3MS *qatal* and *wayyiqtol* verbs beginning in v. 24 stretching until v. 44: "He [God] turned... And he sent... And he gave... And he struck... And he brought," etc. At the end of this much longer chain, v. 45 reads, "that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws." The conjunction + *yiqtol* shows the purpose of the chain of verbs in v. 22–44. Also, the Psalms are often meant to be interpreted in their context. The next Psalm focuses on the role of faith and the importance of Moses (106:6–7, 13, 23).

<sup>46</sup> This soldier should also believe that Moses speaks for God even when his authority is challenged. When things were going badly for Israel, they grumbled "against God and against Moses" (Num 21:5). Grumbling against Moses is primarily grumbling against God (Exod 16:8; Num 16:11). Korah's rebellion is one of the best examples of the authority of Moses challenged and vindicated through miracles. This vindication does not come through human means but by a large scale miracle that was seen by the entire community (Num 16:28–32, 35; cf. Num 12:1–15). After this account, the people become angry with Moses and Aaron because they "killed" the people of the Lord (Num 16:41). Ironically, God then caused a plague to break out on the people, and Aaron became their means of salvation (Num 16:48–49). Finally, Aaron is vindicated when his staff buds (Numbers 17). This account is extremely subjective and could have easily have been faked. However, given the two contextual miracles (the ground swallowing Korah's party and the plague), there is no need to fake further miracles.

<sup>47</sup> Exodus-Deuteronomy frequently makes appeals to the sense of sight. Here are a few examples where the concept of physical sight is appealed to: Exod 4:30–31; 6:1; 7:20; 9:8; 10:23; 14:13, 30–31; 16:5–9, 15, 32; 17:6; 19:4, 11; 20:18, 22; 24:10–17; 33:10; 34:10, 30, 35, 40:38; Lev 9:24; 26:45; Num 11:23–25; 14:14, 22–23; 20:8; 21:8; 32:11; Deut 1:30, 35–36; 3:21; 4:3, 9, 12, 15, 34–36; 5:24; 6:22; 7:19; 10:21; 11:2, 7; 29:2–4; 34:10–12.

<sup>48</sup> Wright, *Knowing God the Father* 44.

<sup>49</sup> It is not within the scope of this paper to argue that the "violence of God" motif in the Hebrew Bible is tied with the "weakness is good" motif. I have identified at least seven "weakness is good" regulations in the text that would be suicidal to obey if the "violence of God" motif were not rooted in reality.

the people to stand “in awe of [Joshua] just as they stood in awe of Moses” (Josh 4:14).

Further, I would contend that it is very likely that the enemies in the land of Canaan also *knew* that God was really with Joshua. Exodus 40:34–38 reads, “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle... *throughout all their journeys*... . The cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and the fire was in it by night, *in the sight of all the house of Israel* throughout all their journeys” (cf. Num 9:15–23). These verses are extremely important to the present discussion. First, the presence of God is always visible “in the sight” of Israel, whether the people are moving or stationary. Second, the tabernacle kept moving until it reached the place where God would cause his name to dwell (Deut 12:11; 14:23; 16:2–11).<sup>50</sup> This means that, during the conquest, there was a miraculous presence of God that any person who came close to Israel’s camp could see. If the presence of God was with Israel all the time in a visibly miraculous way, then it was also with them (or close by) when they approached a city to make war against it. This means that both the Israelites and likely the inhabitants of Canaan saw the miraculous presence of God.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> The presence would have led them until it rested at Shiloh (Josh 18:1) just like the manna continued until the land provided for the people’s needs (Josh 5:12). When the ark came to Jerusalem during Solomon’s dedication ceremony, the glory of the Lord transferred to the temple. The epistemic proof that the glory moved to the temple was threefold: (1) the text claims that “the glory of the LORD filled the temple”; (2) “fire came down”; (3) “the glory of the LORD [was] *on* the temple” (2 Chr 7:1–3; cf. 1 Kgs 8:10–13). I believe that the text pictures the first two elements as temporary (Exod 40:34–36; Lev 9:23–24) since Moses and the priests were later able to enter the temple. The third element, which Chronicles says was “on the temple,” seems to be the permanent visualization of God’s favor and guidance which was always before the eyes of the people (Exod 40:38; cf. Isa 4:5). Among other things, this miracle was an ever-present stamp of approval on the covenant, as articulated through Moses, that contained blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Lev 26; Deut 28). Later prophets could, with certainty, declare God’s coming judgment when they saw the ever-increasing severity of judgment. The pattern that apostasy would lead to a forfeiture of the land was set in the Pentateuch, and was continuously verified by the presence of God in the temple. The presence remained until before the exile of Judah (Ezekiel 9–11). It does not seem like the visible glory cloud returned to the post-exilic temple (Mal 3:1). Haggai 2:4–9 shows that God was present with the people, but it was a less magnificent presence (cf. Ezek 11:6). Maybe it was the lesser presence Moses feared would result from Israel’s apostasy (Exod 33:3–5 15). This lesser presence did not carry the epistemic weight of the full glory cloud. Moses says, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring me up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?” (Exod 33:15–17).

<sup>51</sup> Therefore, when Israel approached and offered terms of peace, the inhabitants’ own hardness against Yahweh was foolish. Where miraculous validation increases, so does culpability. Here is a list of people who chose to war with Israel even though they likely saw the miraculous presence of God with their own eyes: the Egyptians (Exod 13:17–22; 14:19–20), Amalekites (Exod 17:8–16), southern Canaanites (Num 21:1–4), the king of Bashan (Num 21:33–35), Midianites (Num 31:6–12), inhabitants of Jericho (Josh 6:1–27), Ai (Josh 8:1–29), Jerusalem and allies (Josh 10:8–26), Libnah (Josh 10:29–30), Lacish (Josh 10:31–32), Gezer (Josh 10:33), Eglon (Josh 10:34–35), Hebron (Josh 10:36–37), Debir (Josh 10:38–39), Jabin and allies (11:1–15). Some enemies are inside the Promised Land, and others are outside. At the very least, the Israelite soldier asking the “Why should I believe?” question would have seen the miraculous presence before departing for war. It cannot be proven that the miraculous presence of God was always visible to the nation being offered the terms of peace as described in Deut 20:10–15.

2. *The epistemological bank account.* This study has argued that God chose to unite new knowledge of life-taking obedience with miracles. These miracles safeguard the validation of Yahweh's will by making deposits in the Israelites epistemological bank account. In the present day, when someone makes a claim, whether they claim to speak for God or for the President, we weigh the validity of their claim based on the evidence. We believe some reports and disbelieve others. The soldier in Moses' army is no different. He should not believe Moses until Moses makes a large enough trust deposit. As I argued before, *Category 2-* miracles are smaller miracles that go against the normal pattern of nature and carry less epistemic value. *Category 2+* miracles are large scale miracles that appeal to greater epistemic validation. In the chart below (see key in appendix I for further explanation of the symbols), I will examine only four events of the exodus and show how these events deposit trust in the soldier's bank account.

---

However, we do know that the ark sometimes accompanied military expeditions (Joshua 6–7; 1 Sam 4:3–11), although this was not always the case as the kingdom grew (2 Sam 15:24–25).

Chart 4:			
	Account	Evidence that Moses Should Be Believed	Passage
1	The burning bush	!- 👁 👂 👃 S	Exod 3:1-14
<p>Moses claims a subjective (<i>Category 2</i> miracle) encounter with God involving his sense of sight, hearing, touch, and smell. This claim of Moses <i>should not</i> constitute a large deposit in the soldier's epistemological bank account. A soldier <i>should not</i> fight for someone who only claims God talked to him through a bush.</p>			
2	The pillar of cloud and fire	! ! ! !- 👁 👂 👃 (heat) S (smoke) 2 ⌚	Exod 13:21-22; 40:34-38
<p>Moses is shown to be God's mouthpiece by communal validation through the sense of sight, hearing, touch, and smell. People from multiple ethnic and faith positions saw this miracle that lasted for centuries. The pillar of fire is a large deposit in the soldier's epistemological bank account. This <i>Category 2+</i> miracle can be verified any time the soldier looks towards the tabernacle. See the previous footnote for my argument that the glory cloud was visible to the people in both the tabernacle and temple.</p>			
3	The events at Mt. Sinai	!- 👁 👂 👃 S T (Moses' body sustained without food) ⌚ 👁 ! ! ! !- 👁 👂 👃 S ⌚ 👁	Exod 19:16-25; 24
<p>This event involves both subjective (<i>Category 2-</i>) and communal (<i>Category 2+</i>) elements. Subjectively, Moses makes claims based on the sense of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. His subjective experience happens for an extended period of time and the event was foretold. Communally, the people experienced the event through the sense of sight, hearing, touch, and smell. Their communal experience happens for an extended period of time and the event was foretold. Sinai is a large deposit in the soldier's epistemological bank account. He should believe Moses on the subjective elements because of the communal validation.</p>			
4	Judgment on Korah	! ! ! !- 👁 👂 👃 (as the ground opens and closes) 👃 ⌚ ⌚ 👁	Numbers 16
<p>Moses' authority is vindicated as the people experience a <i>Category 2+</i> miracle with their sense of sight, hearing, and touch. This miracle involves extended time because the members of Korah's household died and would not return. There is also a miraculous distinction between Korah's household and the rest of Israel. And this event was foretold when Moses commanded Israel to separate from Korah.</p>			

We can see from these four accounts alone that Moses should be believed when he claims to speak for Yahweh. Here is my formula for the miraculous validation which is claimed to have been deposited into the soldiers epistemological bank account: [ ( †and††† ( 👁 👂 S T 2 ☠ ☞ ) ) multiplied by extended ⌘ ] = a justified, true belief that Moses really is the mouthpiece of Yahweh.<sup>52</sup> I am not claiming that this much validation is always needed for a belief to be true, only that this is the amount of validation claimed in the narratives.

3. *Toward an a fortiori anachronistic reading of the exodus and conquest.* Above I argued that the Israelite soldier would have had an epistemological bank account allowing him to evaluate the claims of Moses and either to accept or reject his message based on the evidence. Now I want to argue that the trust can be transferred anachronistically with the result that spurious accounts gain credibility precisely because they are situated in the context of large scale miracles. I believe that we should read the narrative of the exodus and conquest in an *a fortiori* anachronistic manner. I say *a fortiori* because a soldier would believe the claims that could be easily faked (God talked to me in a bush) because of the ones that could not easily be faked (crossing the Sea, pillar of fire, daily manna). I say it should also be anachronistic because the soldier would read the epistemological currency from one point of the narrative into another. A skeptical soldier should *believe backwards* (we do this all the time). In everyday communication, we believe a trustworthy person’s story about a past experience even though we were not there. We anachronistically believe the unverifiable because of what we can presently verify. I argued in chart 3 that some of Moses’ claims should be trusted and others should be doubted. The following chart reproduces those findings but a new conclusion is reached when the text is read in an *a fortiori* anachronistic manner.

Chart 5: Spectrum of the Epistemic Value of Miracle Claims When Read in an <i>A Fortiori</i> Anachronistic Manner			
Category	2-	2	2+
Claim	“God talked to me in a bush”	“God made bitter water sweet”	“God fed us for decades with magic bread”
Epistemic Value	Lesser	Moderate	Greater
Conclusion	I should doubt this claim	I should hold this experience loosely	I should trust this

---

<sup>52</sup> Translation Key: Subjective (†) and communal (†††) miracles which are validated through the sense of sight ( 👁 ), hearing ( 👂 ), touch ( ✋ ), smell ( S ), taste ( T ), validated by multiple ethnic and theological groups ( 2 ), miraculous death ( ☠ ), miraculous distinction ( ☞ ), and advanced prophetic detail ( ☞ ), multiplied by extended or repeated time ( ⌘ ), equals a justified true belief that Moses really is the mouthpiece of God.



<i>A Fortiori</i> Anachronistic Reading	← A soldier can <i>read trust back</i> into the story		
New Conclu- sion	I trust that God talked to Moses in a bush	and I trust that God made bitter water sweet	because God fed us with with manna for decades

This approach shows that all of Moses’ claims should be believed because of the *Category 2+* miracles. Further, this approach shows how the attempt to demythologize the text is not dealing with the real claims that are made in the text. This approach is contrasted with the *a fortiori* anachronistic approach as follows:

- Demythological reading: Because anyone can claim that God talked to him in a bush, and because someone could fake making the bitter water sweet, the manna miracles should also be doubted.
- *A fortiori* anachronistic reading: Because the manna miracles (and dozens of other ones) could *not* be faked, I can trust that the bitter water was really made sweet and that Moses really talked to God in a bush.

In summary, I am arguing that the entirety of the exodus story as recounted by Moses should be believed because of the large-scale epistemically verifiable miracles which are embedded in the text.<sup>53</sup>

3. *Moses, miracles, and the ancient Near East.* As mentioned earlier, the type of validation claimed in the exodus and conquest narratives (as shown in the formula above) differs greatly from the ones claimed in the ancient Near East. John Walton notes the impoverished epistemology of the ANE: “Divination produced the only divine revelation known in the ancient Near East. Through its mechanisms, the ancients believed not that they could know the deity, but that they could get a glimpse of the designs and will of the deity.”<sup>54</sup> Divination and magic are completely forbidden for Israelites. They are not to ground their epistemology of Yahweh through the subjective means used in the ANE.<sup>55</sup>

Jeffrey Niehaus has noted several features of ANE political authority.<sup>56</sup> There are numerous overlaps with the Hebrew Bible, but the contrasts are also significant.

<sup>53</sup> No combination of *Category 2-* miracle claims can ever equal the epistemic value of one *Category 2+* miracle. For example, even if someone told me they talked to God 1,000 times in a cave, I should doubt them. One pillar of fire (as described in the exodus) is worth more than innumerable subjective claims. Epistemic currency transfers *from the greater to the lesser*.

<sup>54</sup> John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 267.

<sup>55</sup> The one exception is the casting of lots. Walton notes that lots gave an unambiguous answer. They are “entirely binary,” meaning that the answer is not open to interpretation, unlike the ANE practices like consulting a liver. God “did not ‘write’ his messages in the entrails of animals or in the movement of the heavenly bodies” (ibid. 271, 273). In the Bible, the practice of lots was established by a miraculously validated mouthpiece and was usually practiced in the context of the visible presence of the glory cloud.

<sup>56</sup> Jeffrey Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008) 56, 82.

The Hebrew Bible differentiates itself by adding the claim that the mouthpiece of God is validated by multiple, large-scale, communal (*Category 2+*) miracles.<sup>57</sup> This sets Moses and Joshua's claims in the realm of verifiability, while the claims of ANE leaders were not.<sup>58</sup> It is not enough to claim that the warfare passages of the Hebrew Bible fit into their ANE setting. Because of the miracles recorded there, the material in Exodus–Joshua claims to be of an entirely different nature. It is the difference between saying “I speak for God,” and “I speak for the God who just dried up the Sea, is leading you by a pillar of fire, and is feeding you daily with magic bread from heaven.”

4. *Inheriting ripples.* The pattern of the biblical narrative has been this: when large-scale miraculous activity and increased prophetic utterances abound, there is usually a call to *restore order to chaos through destruction*. Large-scale miracles tend to cluster with sacralized violence. I call this clustering *prophetic punctuated equilibrium*.<sup>59</sup> This punctuated prophetic activity happens the most in conjunction with the establishment of the old and new covenants. However, at the pinnacle of divine revelation (the Word became flesh) and the culmination of all miraculous validation (the resurrection of Christ), the pattern is reversed. Jesus absorbs the violence of God when he became the substitute for sinful man.<sup>60</sup> “At the cross, God turned evil

<sup>57</sup> John Walton rightly notes the historical *uniqueness* when “Moses performs signs to establish his credibility” (*Ancient Near Eastern Thought* 274).

<sup>58</sup> John Walton has a chart detailing 95 “ancient near east prophetic oracles” from the Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian period. This detailed chart includes indictments, promises of divine action, promises for the leader, and warnings against enemies. What is significant in these oracles is which types of validation are claimed and which types are not. Prophetic statements showing that the deity was on your side include victory in battle, having your name established, conquest, safety, and divine sponsorship. Prophetic statements showing that the deity was *not* on your side include loss of land, treachery, plague, and the promise of disaster. All of these things are subjective (*Category 2-*) miracle claims. While the Bible claims these things, it goes beyond the ANE example and claims things like the outlandish statement that walls of Jericho will fall down, and that a Sea will part (*Category 2+*). *Ibid.* 245–47.

<sup>59</sup> Punctuated Equilibrium is a term used in evolutionary biology which argues for the mutation of species along the axis of time and morphology. “Punk Eek” has replaced the hypothesis of Phyletic Gradualism. The main difference is this: Phyletic Gradualism argues that species slowly evolve in a fairly consistent manner over long periods of time and Punk Eek argues that most of the mutation happens in a short punctuated spurt of time, followed by long periods of relatively little mutation (stasis). Similarly, the biblical narrative unfolds more like Punk Eek than like Phyletic Gradualism. There is an enormous amount of prophetic activity around a few individuals (Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, Jesus and the disciples), with Moses and Jesus standing the tallest. The sharper the Punk (miraculously validated prophetic activity) the sharper the change to the Eek (change in the geopolitical life). This change is often accompanied by the command to take life. In the fossil record of the biblical text it is no accident that the two greatest episodes of validation and revelation also correspond to the founding of the two covenants. The default pattern of redemptive history is that the seed of Abraham be a life-giving blessing to the nations, but when this pattern is to be changed, large-scale miracles validate the new command.

<sup>60</sup> Christ primarily brings order to chaos *through restoration*. This does not deny that there was an element of destruction to his ministry (defeating principalities), but he did not give the command for his followers to literally take up arms. His present kingdom is not of this world in the way that previous kingdoms were, but the consummation of the future kingdom shows us that *order* will finally and completely be *restored to chaos* through both the *destruction and restoration* of all things. Since Christ's earthly ministry brought order to chaos through restoration, his followers are to live in light of the present *intrusion* of the heavenly kingdom into history in an already, not-yet manner.

against evil and brought about the practical solution to the problem [of evil].... Evil is conquered as evil because God turns it back upon itself.”<sup>61</sup>

Those who live in the time of Isaiah, Hosea, or in the present day, cannot reexperience the exodus. After the miraculous visible presence finally departed in Ezekiel, there is never another command for sacralized life-taking obedience.<sup>62</sup> Sometimes very large epistemological stones (like the exodus) are cast into the lake of history and for those standing on the shore, the ripples do not command “go and experience likewise” but “believe that this happened!”<sup>63</sup> We can no more imitate the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 than we can experience God’s miraculous, repeated, communal, and subjective intervention in Abraham’s life in Genesis 12–21. Likewise, we can no more engage in our own conquest than we can rewalk through the Sea, be guided by a pillar of fire, or eat magic bread from heaven. Moses’ commands are validated by the huge rock he threw into history. Those on the shore see the effect of what God has done for and commanded from those to whom he miraculously disclosed himself. In some biblical stories we are only meant to see and become heirs of the ripples; we are not meant to cast our own stones.<sup>64</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

In the introduction I asked, “How would someone *know* that God really commanded a Holy War?” We have answered this question by showing that the Bible unites the command for life-taking obedience with large-scale communal miracles that function as epistemological currency in the soldier’s trust bank. Be-

<sup>61</sup> Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross: An Analytical Look at the Problem of Pain* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994) 104, 132.

<sup>62</sup> There are other wars after Joshua’s time and before the exile. If the wars are against people inside the land, then Moses’ validated commands are still in operation. The ongoing validity of the commands is visualized by the Shekinah glory. Israel never wins an offensive war against those outside the land. Occasionally Israel triumphed over their attacking enemies, and a few times God rescued them in a manner similar to the victory at the exodus (2 Kgs 19:35). Their frequent defeat is a sign that they have broken faith with Yahweh and have fallen under the covenant curses. They know this act / consequence arrangement is true because it was announced by a miraculously validated prophet (Lev 26:14–44; Deut 28:15–66). Sometimes, an unrighteous nation is used by God to bring judgment upon another nation (Deut 28:49; 2 Chr 35:21–22; Jer 5:15, 34:21–22; Amos 6:14; Hab 1:5–12) but the text is not clear how God brings this about. Once Israel goes into captivity, they are commanded to seek the good of their captors (Jer 29:7). The one account of violence while in captivity comes at the foreign king’s command allowing them to defend themselves (Esther 8:11–14; 9:5–6). Once the people return to the land by royal decree, they arm themselves in self-defense (Neh 4:10–23).

<sup>63</sup> “The Bible appeals to the people of God to *remember*, to call to mind their experiences, to call to mind their experiences of God’s faithfulness to his promises—experiences some of which are direct, and most of which are part of the shared corporate memory of the covenant. The exodus from Egypt and the resurrection of Jesus are empirical facts that build trust. This is the stuff that relationships are built upon” (Collins, *Genesis 1–4* 274). This is the process whereby empirical events are passed along to other generations who cannot witness them with their own eyes.

<sup>64</sup> Our “thus says the Lord,” and “this is the will of God,” primarily derive from the text. The Christian is God’s mouthpiece to the degree that he or she stays anchored to the text as read through the lens of the cross.

cause the God of the Bible cares that people know his commands are legitimate, there is a well-developed epistemology of sacralized violence in the Hebrew Bible.

If the text accurately portrays history, then Moses and Joshua are vindicated as reliable conduits of God's will. The skeptical soldiers in their army should have believed them. The decades-long, undeniable, communal miracles of God lend credibility to his mouthpieces when they declare "thus says the LORD."

Because God chose to unite new commands for life-taking obedience with miracles, there is solid ground from which we can critique the present-day leader who claims that God has commanded him to go to war. People in the present day should doubt any leader who uses this type of language because their leader does not have the large-scale miraculous validation required to pass the epistemological exam. Leaders sometimes borrow language from the exodus, but they cannot repeat the context of the exodus—and thus their appeals to sacralized violence should be discredited. Repeating the oath of office does not turn an unelected citizen into the President and give him the authority to sign laws or declare war. In the same way, invoking the Deity by saying that he declared violence does not say anything true about reality. Nothing like the claimed miracles surrounding the exodus and conquest has ever been historically repeated; therefore all comparisons are false comparisons. The large-scale miracles claimed in the text could never be faked.

This essay has aimed to construct an argument that can be used by anyone to discredit non-canonical, sacralized violence. One need not believe in God or in the Bible as God's authoritative word to arrive at the conclusion of this essay—because the violent commands which are grounded in and conjoined to the epistemically miraculous context in which they were given, the exodus and conquest, as recorded in the final form of the Hebrew Bible, are inimitable.

## APPENDIX I

## KEY FOR THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BANK ACCOUNT

Symbol	Chart 6: KEY FOR THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL BANK ACCOUNT
!	Subjective category of witness
!!!	Communal category of witnesses
👁️	Appeal to validation through the sense of sight
👂	Appeal to validation through the sense of hearing
👋	Appeal to validation through the sense of touch
S	Appeal to validation through the sense of smell
T	Appeal to validation through the sense of taste
2	Validation from multiple ethnic or theo-political groups
☠️	Death occurs during event (usually through non-human means)
⚔️	Distinction made between those judged and those vindicated
👁️🗨️	The miraculous event was foretold
⌚	The miraculous event lasts a while (minutes, hours, days, decades) The effect is felt long after (minutes, hours, days, decades)
P	Promises are given by God