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Why God's Rhetoric?

Entitled to Trouble

The title and sub-title of this book draw together several incongruous, and difficult to define, terms whose very linkage may surprise some or perplex and outrage others. Despite the emergence of a more self-consciously modern rhetorical criticism as far back as 1968, and despite Margaret D. Zulick's effort in 2009 to outline various theoretical and critical approaches to the "rhetoric of religion,"[1] Wayne C. Booth observes that, prior to 1991, his efforts to locate sources that link "rhetoric" and "religion," "causally or independently," turned up only one author, Kenneth Burke,[2] an author Zulick also mentions as her first "fellow traveler" in academic studies of rhetoric and religion,[3] a traveler whose fellowship I welcome to this book as well.

Booth reports that his library's card catalogue had many sources on rhetoric, classical or modern, on "Religion and Science" or "Science and Religion," but only Burke's 1961 book, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, seemed useful to Booth's own effort to examine whether rhetoric and religion, however defined as terms, were "*essentially and constitutively* wedded . . ."[4] Booth concedes that while the library catalogue categories are by no means definitive, he believed that, as of 1991, "it [was] safe to say that most thinkers . . . ,

1. Zulick, "Rhetoric and Religion," 125–38.
2. Booth, "Rhetoric and Religion," 63.
3. Zulick, "Rhetoric and Religion," 125.
4. Booth, "Rhetoric and Religion," 63.

including rhetoricians and theologians," would "consider" the "question" he was asking "peculiar" at best.

The "peculiarity" of Booth's question intensifies if the terms become, not "rhetoric and religion," but "rhetoric and God," or "eloquence and God." My initial Google search of "God and rhetoric" a few years ago identified hundreds of thousands of items, but a cursory scan of the first few hundred of these suggested that most were largely concerned with the effects of rhetorical appeals to this or that deity, to the uses of "God" in different kinds of human rhetoric, some pious and inspirational, some more vitriolic and even violent. Only a few seemed focused on conjoining God and rhetoric per se. In many ways, perhaps, the paucity of relevant sources on the Internet is not entirely surprising. The words "God," "eloquence," and "rhetoric" are seldom heard in the same breath or found in the same sentence, unless it is to condemn or praise one over the other.

Scholars of rhetoric may agree with Booth that one reason for the paucity of sources is that "rhetoric," as a word and as a humanistic art, has had a confusing history, its "reputation" as a "subject" rising and falling over the centuries almost as much as philosophy's,[5] to which rhetoric is—and was—more often connected than to religion. That, at least, is how Booth saw the matter in 2004. In 1991, though, he argued that the "two slippery words" and "domains" of rhetoric and religion suffered "parallel" declines from the sixteenth to the early part of the nineteenth centuries, declines largely if not entirely precipitated by the rise and adulation of scientific thinking.[6] Yet, as I mentioned in my introduction, biblical rhetorical criticism derives from one of the Catholic Church's major intellects, Augustine, and re-emerged as early as 1968. Why Booth was unable to discover these beginning points, or was unwilling to admit he had found them, either in 1991 or 2004, remains a separate question I am not prepared to answer.

It is certainly true that, as a term, "rhetoric" is almost always negatively charged in the minds and speech of those outside its rich, diverse scholarship. Even among those in the broadcast media, the word is often simply equated with "bullshit,"[7] and just as often used as the weaker term in such popular binaries as "rhetoric/reality," "rhetoric/action," "rhetoric/fact," or "rhetoric/reason (rationality)." So, except for a handful of scholars and critics, quite a few people believe, if they will not openly say so, that "rhetoric," or Cicero's grander synonym, "eloquence," are high-sounding,

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5. Booth, *Rhetoric of Rhetoric,* 1.

6. Booth, "Rhetoric and Religion," 66.

7. On this point, see Tietge, "Rhetoric Is not Bullshit," 229; Fredal, "Rhetoric and Bullshit," 243–59.

pompous names for superficial ads or politicians' almost always mindless slogans or, worse, mindless speeches. Many seem fully unaware that debates over "rhetoric's" meaning and its value as an "art" and subject of study trace back as far as Plato, if not before.

"God," of course, remains a gloriously ambiguous word whose most ancient etymology for Jacques Derrida came from *deiwos*, meaning "celestial light."[8] But, as any candid theologian or historian of the Bible will soon concede, this etymology has by no means limited how human beings have thought about or imagined God—even to the point of insisting, often violently, that no images of God or even of God's prophets should be permitted, much less encouraged.[9] The ambiguity of the word, along with the various ways humankind has imagined "God," may very well be the reason, as Booth believed in 1991, that religion and rhetoric have followed parallel, descending trajectories, since any defense of a "God" as people imagine Him must resort to rhetorical, not scientific "proofs," for justification.[10]

No study of God's rhetoric, and certainly not this one, would or should impose upon itself the task of examining *every* concept or image of God human beings have invented. This book, rather, focuses on the biblical God, at least that version which has embedded itself in America's popular imagination. This God appears as a total, unified, omniscient, omnipotent personality, capable of speech, of assuming a commanding presence in many forms, as voice, as words, as text, as the Word, as theophanies, actual, perceptible manifestations of God's presence through lessor divine beings—angels, for example—and through direct interventions in and manipulations of the natural order of the world that scientists themselves seek to know and understand. This biblical God, along with His putative "son," Jesus Christ, whose historical existence so many believe in, dominates and appears to unify that vast array of stories, poems, genealogies, and chronicles that make up the so-called "Old" and "New" Testaments—Testaments derived from copying, re-copying, redacting, and splicing together different texts and oral traditions over centuries by the imperfect, human hands of various authors and editors, living in various locales and historical periods, to make what many take to be the grand narrative of the sacred Holy Bible.

The biblical God who emerges out of these textual layers composed by various and, in most cases unknown, authors—this God, whatever else He may be for believers and non-believers alike—does *exist* in and *as* texts

8. For this etymology, see Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 46.

9. For a useful, and readable, introduction to the changing concepts and images of God across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, see Armstrong, *History of God*.

10. Booth, "Rhetoric and Religion," 71.

that no one, not even the most hardened atheist or dogmatic skeptic, will be quick to deny as empirical givens. What this God does and says in this narratively shaped text of many narratives, of many disparate, non-narrative texts, will obviously vary from translation to translation, Bible to Bible, denomination to denomination. This study, though, will rely on the biblical God as He is shown to speak and act in the Revised Standard Edition of the Bible, based as it was on the King James Bible, based it was on earlier English Bibles, the Geneva and Bishop's Bible, reaching back to William Tyndale's monumental, if incomplete and controversial, translations of the Old and New Testaments.

This God has been inferred for centuries by many people from the various uses of the word in the many different texts that biblical scholars and historians have studied. In those texts, clearly, "God" has different meanings and evokes a variety of images and metaphors—so much so that, from a strictly historical-textual perspective, no one, unified deity can really be identified in the Bible itself, much less a single, unified narrative in which this God can be said to participate. Yet that is not the "God" that most people say they believe in or say they even doubt or deny. That "God" is seen, rightly or wrongly, as a *person*, the predominate actor in the "story" the Bible supposedly tells. It is this "God" that constitutes the focus of this book, the God who speaks and acts *as if* He is a rhetor.

If this God, among many others, and this God's rhetoric, is to be explored, what is to be meant by "rhetoric" when applied to His speeches and actions? What definitional criteria may be justifiably applied to this God, and does considering Him as the primary rhetor of the Bible diminish or otherwise denigrate His divine status? These are difficult questions certainly, but they cannot be avoided in a book such as this.

Certainly, as I have already said, part of the difficulty arises from largely pejorative views of *rhetoric* itself and the many ways "rhetorical criticism" has been defined and practiced. These pejorative views have been a legitimate part of rhetoric's long history as a humanistic art of study, going back to Plato's famous attacks. Scholars of rhetoric would probably be the first to admit that these negative views are not entirely to be ignored; and, for all that scholars have argued or will argue to the contrary,[11] the negative coloring cannot be so easily bleached away because it persists even now.[12]

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11. Tietge, "Rhetoric Is not Bullshit," 229–40; Fredal, "Rhetoric and Bullshit," 243–59.

12. This linkage can still be found in Frankfurt's popular little essay, *On Bullshit*, 16–19. Frankfurt goes on to refine his definition of "bullshit" as a blatant "lack of connection to a concern with truth . . . this indifference to how things really are . . . the essence of bullshit," 33–34.

In fact, one of the reasons it is possible to *know* that rhetoric has a *history* as a subject may be because its meaning and value have changed over the centuries, and because various theorists and historians have debated over these changes, and have used rhetoric in these debates, regardless of their positions on the art itself.

Toward a Working Definition of "Rhetoric"

Even so, it would be foolish to try to explore the biblical God's rhetoric without at least a working definition for this word as it will be used in the chapters ahead, and without justifying each part of that definition. Few scholars of rhetoric, or even religious rhetoric, will think the definition below seems particularly novel or "original," since it has been largely derived from rhetoric's lengthy and various traditions, classical and contemporary. In the pages ahead, then, "rhetoric" will refer to *any verbal, visual, or material means, or any combination of these, selected to influence, affect, or change another's actions, attitudes, or beliefs, including violence or threats of violence.*[13] "Rhetorical criticism," based on this definition, refers to *any critic's efforts to describe, analyze and, where possible, assess the means human rhetors adopt to achieve these ends*. As should become clear below, neither the definition of "rhetoric" nor "rhetorical criticism" assumes a necessarily insuperable dichotomy between intentionally affective ends and the means, logical, affective,, stylistic, or otherwise, chosen to try to accomplish those ends.

Both definitions, admittedly, apply to only *human* rhetoric, even though some theorists would likely insist that rhetoric's *essential* meaning as an "art" *must exclude* violence, threats of violence, or other means—money, sex—to force or impose influence, affect, or change on human beings.[14] This insistence is not without compelling justifications. Violence or its threat significantly deviates from the long-standing belief that rhetoric's "art" consists in a human rhetor's finding and inventing reasons to convince or persuade one or more people. There is little "art" in getting a spouse to agree with one's views on extra-marital sex if a shotgun is being held to that spouse's head. In such a case, the shotgun renders the need to offer reasons and evidence otiose. Similarly, there is little to no "art" in forcing a group of people

13. This definition derives primarily from Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives*, 43, and Booth's *Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, xi, though neither included violence in their definitions. Further citations to Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives* are to the 1969 reprint.

14. This seems to be Booth's position in *Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, xi. It is also Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's view in *New Rhetoric*, 55. Further citations to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's *New Rhetoric* are to the 1969 reprinted translation.

or an entire nation to do another nation's bidding if the aggressor nation's military, armed with superior weaponry, seeks to impose its will rather than attempting to use verbal means to persuade.

Many scholars of rhetoric are likely to assume that the "artistry," the "eloquence," in what a speaker or writer argues, lies, to use Kenneth Burke's word, in "inducing" people to do a rhetor's bidding without "forcing" them upon threat of harm or annihilation.[15] This distinction, between persuasion and coercion or force, has been maintained at least since Aristotle separated "artistic" or "artificial" proofs from "inartistic," "inartificial" ones.[16] Basically, then, as an "art," rhetoric has depended on *more* than a person's or group's insistence on being right on this or that issue while everyone else is wrong. For rhetors, inducing human beings to believe or act has always required more than mere insistence, even when brandishing weapons of violence or threatening violence, and more than the audible volume of the words used to insist on compliance or obedience. It takes much more than simply having and expressing an "opinion" on some urgent matter. What that "more" *is* is, in fact, rhetoric's "art." Readers or auditors must, however, be *free to resist* a rhetor's arguments and appeals*, or even a rhetorical critic's analyses and descriptions of these, no matter how adept a speaker or writer or critic may be, and no matter how well-armed for possible violence. That freedom, too, is *essential* to rhetoric's art. Resisting a machine gun, obviously, may be lethal. But some do resist, so even direct violence is not always persuasive against every one.

Aristotle, it must be remembered, judged an argument "inartistic" if it was, say, based on evidence elicited through "torture."[17] Arguments based on evidence from torture was to Aristotle "inartificial" because these arguments did not require from rhetors much in the way of intellectual and verbal resources to be invented. Evidence from torture or eyewitnesses does not demand a rhetor *make* anything at all; and for Aristotle arguments were, in the end, *humanly made constructs*. Arguments from torture evidence and from witness testimony remained *parts* of Aristotle's rhetoric. But these parts had little to do with rhetoric's "art." Oddly, Aristotle does not explicitly mention violence or the threat of violence as a means to convince and persuade an audience.

Yet the proposed working definitions of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism above cannot realistically exclude violence or threats of violence, just

15. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 43.

16. Aristotle, *"Art" of Rhetoric*, trans. Freese, 1.ii.14, ii.2. Further references are to this translation.

17. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.ii.14, ii.2.

as it cannot exclude torture, if rhetoric's *full range* of persuasive resources are to be included within its meaning, and if a critic of rhetoric is to describe and analyze those resources. This recognition has certainly not escaped attention.[18] So it seems at least plausible that Aristotle might have considered violence, or threats of violence, as "inartificial" proofs that a rhetor *could use* to convince and persuade an audience if all other means had failed.

Certainly, this working definition of rhetoric highlights "artificial" proofs, much as Aristotle and many other theorists of rhetoric have. However, a more comprehensive view of rhetoric cannot *completely rule out* "inartificial" proofs—like confessions from torture or even actual, imminent violence. The historical record of the human species would rise up to contradict such exclusions, and the challenge would certainly be justifiable. Human history shows all too well that violence or its threat has been—and will continue to be—used to convince and persuade those who refuse to bend to other means of persuasion. The six gun thought to have tamed the American West was often called "the old persuader" for this very reason. Weaponries of all kinds, whatever their advertised purposes, have been invented and justified precisely for the explicit or implicit purpose of persuasion.

So human rhetoric, according to the proposed definition, *does*—and *often must*—include inartificial proofs, including violent acts and or threats of the same, so that it may at least pass a basic "reality" test. Threatening harm or annihilation often appears rhetorically motivated, so persuasion, even if predicated on an audience's freedom to resist or ignore a rhetor's artistic arguments, can blur into coercion so that there is scant space between them. Human rhetors and, as I will later show, the biblical God, may resort to violent force or its threat to accomplish persuasive aims. Rhetoric seems perfectly capable of inflicting both symbolic and actual harm against human beings, and it would seem overly naïve to suggest otherwise.

Both violent rhetoric and rhetorically motivated violence, then, seek to persuade by force. Each desires to subdue whoever or whatever resists what is claimed and argued. That much admitted, it is certainly possible that an audience may still risk resistance. This audience may be destroyed in the process, but it may also choose to fight back, to meet rhetorically charged violence with its own rhetorically charged counter-violence. An audience may also choose to surrender to the rhetoric of violence. Or it may allow itself to be harmed or destroyed rather than be coerced to do or believe what a rhetor desires. Just as human history does not lack examples of wars and insurrections driven by rhetorical motives, so it also does not lack examples

18. On this point, see Fish, "Doing What Comes Naturally, 517; Hunter, "Considering Issues of Rhetoric and Violence," 2–8; Foley, "*Peitho* and *Bia*," 173–81.

of individual or collective martyrdom whose choice of self-sacrifice has rhetorical motives of its own. In either case, an audience *still chooses* what it will do when facing violent rhetoric or the rhetoric of violence. Fighting back and self-sacrifice remain as choices. So, in the end, no rhetorical act, whether driven by arguments or by guns and tanks, or both, can be assumed to be *absolutely persuasive* in its effects. A wholly persuasive rhetoric, it seems, remains an utter impossibility even if violence is permitted among its means.

The proposed definition, however, is intentionally and largely centered on rhetoric as an art using symbolic media to affect others. Not all rhetoric aspires to use resources artfully, since artless, shoddy rhetoric clearly exists, and some of its practitioners are often ready to reach for force and violence instead of arguments to achieve their goals when the artlessness of their rhetoric fails or its deficiencies are exposed. Nevertheless, my rather broad definition does seek to meet the criteria for a more "self-conscious" rhetorical criticism of the Bible emphasized by a number of scholars.[19] That is, in stressing the "verbal," symbolic nature of this art, the proposed definition acknowledges that rhetoric has traditionally centered on spoken *and* written language, often with no bright line separating the two since speeches were often written before they were orally delivered. But that emphasis cannot remove or simply ignore other, extra-verbal strategies a critic may discern in any rhetorical act.

Further, in highlighting the rhetorical *intent* of a speech or a text to influence, affect, or change other people's actions, beliefs, or attitudes, my definitions would emphasize the deliberate use of verbal symbols for this purpose. The chosen purpose or intent seeks and hopes for the intended effect—conviction and/or persuasion—in the person or group addressed. *But a rhetor's intended purpose in and of itself does not and cannot guarantee in advance the effect sought, even if a rhetor resorts to "inartistic" means such as torture or violence.*

Human rhetors, by my proposed definitions, try to accomplish a purpose, to alter or change an existing state of affairs that can, in fact, be changed by rhetorical means (not all existing states would be subject to such rhetorical efforts). A conflicted state of affairs may arise in what people are doing or not doing, believing or not believing, valuing or not valuing, feeling or not feeling, thinking or not thinking. To use the word "change" is not to suggest or imply some "progressive" ideology being smuggled into this proposed definition. "Change" in and of itself does not *necessarily* imply "progress"; a change argued for may very well be "regressive." Additionally,
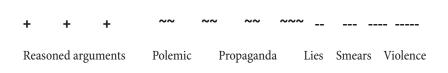
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19. Howard, "Rhetorical Criticism in Old Testament Studies," 103–4.

a rhetor may argue to change an audience considering the adoption of some "progressive" proposal because that rhetor supports an even more "progressive" one.

Still, the definitions proposed do not limit rhetoric or rhetorical intent, today or in the past, to verbal symbols alone or to deliberate intentions. That, too, would be naïve and, for many critics of rhetoric, wholly undesirable. Human beings have many ways of reaching and trying to affect other human beings. They can construct images (static and dynamic) which imply rhetorical motives. They can make gestures with the same motives in mind. They may even project their rhetorical motives onto material objects, hoping to affect others through them. Almost anyone can think of a painting, song, or a movie that has affected her deeply, influenced her attitudes greatly, or even changed her mind. The rhetorical intent of certain hand gestures, too, may be seen on any congested freeway in America. And what would corporate capitalism do if it could not persuade consumers—or at least *believe* it persuades them—on what to wear, what to eat, what to drive, or where to live? In short, all that anyone can *buy and own* may reveal that person's own rhetorical motives, conscious or unconscious, quite apart from the deliberate rhetorical motives of those who sell these goods and services. The point is, efforts to influence and change others, and the means used for these purposes, *can no longer be limited to spoken or written words.*

Given the breadth of the definitions above, rhetoric's "art" would necessarily encompass a wide range of goals and strategies, from the honorable, noble, and beneficial to the dishonorable, deceptive, and unfair, even to the violent (see the diagram below).

Rhetorical Spectrum

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Reasoned arguments	Polemic	Propaganda	Lies	Smears	Violence

The spectrum above assumes a relatively wide qualitative range, so as to include shoddy, artless rhetoric as well as violence or its threat, though this inclusion clearly departs from some scholars' definitions. Rhetoric's "art" certainly remains for human and, as we will see, divine rhetors *primarily* a symbolic (verbal or visual) medium, but that same art may sometimes

exceed symbolic media and pass over into the "non-artistic," extra-symbolic strategies.

The left side of the spectrum acknowledges that human and divine rhetors would depend on rhetoric to solve problems, resolve conflicts, reach decisions, reinforce values and beliefs, and convince and persuade others to cooperate in achieving certain goals. But the right side of the spectrum recognizes rhetoric may also divide, enflame, and pit one person or group against another person or group. It may also try to "destroy" individuals or entire groups—symbolic destruction in the case of caricature, satire, smear-jobs, or character assassination or actual destruction in the cases of direct violence.

The large, gray middle of the spectrum (signaled by the wavy lines) suggests that both human and divine rhetors can advocate for a particular, partisan point-of-view not always heard or attended to (polemic). Ruling bodies (governments and other institutions of power) may further depend on rhetoric as propaganda to try to control persons, groups, or entire nations by presenting only that governing person or body's point-of-view as "true" while distorting, suppressing, or lying about any other opposing points-of-view.

Placing some types of rhetoric to the "left" by no means suggests a political ideology here, any more than placing others to the "right." Yet some may wonder why the diagram is a *spectrum* rather than a hierarchical flow-chart, with the more benign types of rhetoric at the top and descending downward, toward lies, smear-tactics, and violence. Such a hierarchical arrangement is certainly implicit in the spectrum as well as in my working definitions of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism. While I readily concede these points, the shape of a spectrum simply allows for the theoretical possibility of fully justifiable violent rhetoric or the rhetoric of violence.[20] The spectrum must acknowledge the necessary threats of violence, and weapons of violence embodied in military and police forces charged with maintaining law and social order without which modern nation-states could not exist. The actual and possible excesses of violence or violent rhetoric as rhetorical strategies do not and cannot preclude or render illusory valid uses of these strategies in such circumstances that would threaten a state's existence or the existence of its population. A similar point could be made about revolutionary violence or counter-violence that may result from unjust excesses of state-sponsored violence.

Human beings adapt their rhetorical intentions and means according to the situations and the person or persons to be affected. Human rhetors

20. See Arendt's important work on this point, *On Violence*.

can focus on one person, as the biblical God often does, or a large group, as that God also does, though less frequently. Human rhetors may even address their arguments to themselves, as the biblical God does as well. Wherever and whenever conflicts, tensions, or uncertainties exist or arise about what humans *should* think, feel, believe, or do about any given issue, rhetoric soon emerges and can spread across the spectrum, from reasoned argument to more debased, artless forms. In some cases, a rhetor may even have to *invent* the conflicts, tensions, and uncertainties that require argumentation. In other situations, the conflicts and tensions are on-going, emerging then abating, only to re-emerge again.

As later chapters will show, the conflicts and uncertainties that typically and necessarily lead human beings to *invent* rhetoric are, in the biblical God's case, much harder to discern and elucidate. The "issues" or "controversies" that emerge out of human conflicts, by definition, assume *two or more* opposing ways to think, feel, or act about any decision on any state of affairs. Such issue-driven rhetoric may be expected once the biblical God can address an audience other than Himself, but even His rhetoric invented to address human others does not always yield easily to rhetorical analysis of what issues may prompt that rhetoric.

Human rhetoric may take many forms, from written arguments and opinion-articles, to advertisements, cartoons, to direct mail, e-mail, billboards, fliers, blogs, and websites—all the way down to the clothes worn or gestures made. Even scientists, often hostile to rhetoric in any form, rely on rhetorical strategies to persuade their colleagues of findings and conclusions.[21] Various institutionalized religions have for a very long time exploited multi-media forms to promote and support the various deities they worship. Yet, while the rhetoric of the biblical God relies predominantly on "artistic" proofs, spoken or written, in His attempts to argue and persuade, this same God, as the chapters ahead show, will also turn to violence or threats of violence and to theophanies, physical but indirect manifestations of His power and control, to try to achieve His goals.

Readers may wonder, of course, why my working definitions of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism make no mention of "truth," either as an end or goal, or as an ideal that rhetors should aspire to reach in what and how they argue. To be sure, the question of "truth" has never been far from

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21. For the considerable degree to which scientists depend on rhetoric, see Ziman, *Real Science*, 251–53; Swales, *Genre Analysis*, 112, 124–27; and Gross and Levitt, *Higher Superstition*. Graduate programs in rhetorical study at some universities also offer courses in what is often called "the rhetoric of science and technology." For some sense of this subdivision of rhetoric, see Harris's *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric of Science*, and Gross and Gurak's "The State of Rhetoric of Science and Technology," 241–351.

any definition of rhetoric, at least since Plato's famous critiques. Further, it is certainly reasonable to expect "truth" to be important to any study of God's own rhetoric. Yet "truth," when it comes to rhetorical criticism of the Bible, remains "notoriously elusive."[22] It is no easy task to decide what sort of truth-criteria may or should be applied to any given human rhetorical claim, be that claim philosophical, mathematical, historical, and so forth.

Debates over what sort of truth-criteria should be used has been ongoing in the newly emerging field of argumentation theory and informal logic. For a very long time, logical validity and "objective" knowledge have been invoked as the best criteria for judging arguments, at least until argumentation theories introduced what some consider to be a far too "relativistic" criterion of audience-acceptability.[23] Yet, as some argumentation theorists have observed, even if an audience finds a rhetor's premises and conclusions "acceptable," and even if a theorist embraces acceptability as a more humane, socially and historically sensitive criterion, that theorist has already likely presupposed some kind of truth-criterion within what constitutes "acceptability" itself.[24] Thus, it may be better simply to maintain truth-criteria along with acceptability-criteria in judging arguments, so long as a theorist allows for "degrees of truth" in a rhetor's individual premises and conclusions. This problem will re-emerge fully in chapter 8, on judging God's rhetoric *as* rhetoric.

Yet rhetorical discourse, as defined above, encompasses more than the premises and conclusions expected to constitute the most basic kind of argument. Appeals to logos, to human reasoning, have never completely dominated conceptions of rhetoric. Even Aristotle's classical treatment of the art allows for other persuasive appeals, since Aristotle, unlike his teacher, was fully aware that a rhetor sometimes had to argue what was probably true or what an audience would accept as probably true, since the absolute truth in some cases was impossible or too time-consuming to discover.[25]

When a critic tries to examine rhetorical persuasion in the Bible, however, the question of truth-criteria becomes even more complicated, and complicated further still if the rhetorical persuasion a critic seeks to describe and analyze belongs to God Himself. These complications can be seen in the differences between historical criticism's notion of biblical truth and rhetorical criticism's notion of that same truth, however that criticism

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22. Warner, "Introduction," 5–6.

23. On these debates, see Boger, "Subordinating Truth," 187–238.

24. Johnson, *Manifest Rationality*, 195–98.

25. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.i.11–14, ii.3–8.

is understood and practiced.[26] Yet a rhetorical critic, regardless of approach, would do well to consider "biblical texts" as "live options" whose "persuasive strategies" could be treated as "undercutting those texts avowed or implied concern with truth" or as "mutual reinforcement" of that truth.[27] Much would depend, then, not only on the biblical text selected for rhetorical analysis but the specific persuasive strategies adopted in that text. That at least will be the principle guiding the approach to the "truth" of God's rhetoric in this book.

So What's Rhetorical about God?

So far, I have tried to explain and justify the various parts of the proposed, and deliberately broad, definition of rhetoric as a human "art," and rhetorical criticism's responsibilities to analyze and, if and where possible, to assess this art. I have also suggested that parts of the definition apply as much to human rhetoric as to the biblical God's, suggestions to be explored in the pages ahead. Yet, while some may agree with much that has been said about the art of *human* rhetoric and *human* eloquence, they may not be so quick or eager to agree that rhetoric has anything to do with the biblical God. As countless believers would insist, God, though imagined as a person, an agent, is definitely *not* human. So how, they may wonder, can even this admittedly sweeping definition of human rhetoric ever apply to the oxymoronically *nonhuman person* the biblical God is imagined to be?

This is certainly a reasonable question. In fact, it is one of the central questions this book tries to address: Do our ideas about human rhetoric, which have developed over centuries, have any bearing on the central divine being of the Christian Bible? If so, what sort of bearing?

Some have asserted that "*all* religious writing may be seen as 'rhetorical' in the sense that it [the writing] attempts to change behavior (and convince)."[28] From this assertion it would then follow that "the entire Bible is rhetorical, and biblical rhetorical critics can study the arguments of any biblical author to discern the means of persuasion used."

This book does not, of course, attempt to deal with "*all* religious writing" or the "entire Bible" or every "biblical author" in that Bible, assuming these authors are identifiable at all. Further, it may very well be an

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26. For examples of these different views of truth in biblical rhetorical criticism, see Trigg, "Tales Artfully Spun," 117–32 and Kennedy's "'Truth' and 'Rhetoric' in the Pauline Epistles," 195–202.

27. Warner, "Introduction," 8.

28. Howard, "Rhetorical Criticism in Old Testament Studies," 103.

overstatement to claim that the entire corpus of all sacred works, all texts at least seen by those who accept them as "sacred," are rhetorical in nature even in the broad sense of the definitions proposed here. It may be more accurate to assert that all religious writing "attempts to change behavior" and "convince" those whose behaviors or minds, according to any given faith, need changing. But that purpose might more readily apply to those not already converted to a given faith, or those who, although converted, no longer comport themselves according to that faith and must be convinced to do so again.

It may be hyperbolic as well to claim a rhetorical intent, as defined above, for every part of any sacred text, including the Bible, or any author, known or unknown, of any part of the Bible. In some instances, it is impossible to know who the "author" of any given part of the Bible was, or even to recover much of the context for such an author. Further, whoever may have written some of these parts, and whatever the immediate context for any part may have been, there seems to be no compelling reason to limit the biblical authors' intentions to persuasion alone, since language in general, and biblical language in particular, may serve other intentions or aims, be they referential, expressive, or literary.[29] It is certainly true that the Bible, like any other sacred text, may be wielded as a rhetorical artifact against non-believers or believers of a different faith if perceived as threats. Yet this wielding does not automatically mean every part of the Bible or any other sacred text relies on the "means of persuasion" that rhetoric has sought to name and codify over the centuries.

In the pages ahead, my focus will *not* be on the persuasive means of any *one* biblical narrator or author, since it seems impossible to know with much certainty who actually recorded or imagined the speeches or acts attributed to God in the Bible. Such knowledge may never be available. What *is* available, however, are speeches and acts these authors *directly attributed to God*. The question then becomes whether a critic can usefully describe or even assess those speeches and actions as rhetorical in the sense defined above. To what extent are the verbal and non-verbal means the biblical God adopts rhetorically motivated?

In taking *some* (but by no means *all*) of this God's *direct* speeches and acts in the Bible as the focus of my study, I must assume that these speeches and acts, as represented in the textual *reality* of the Bible itself, are the work of many authors and many editors, all fully human and prone to be tendentious in the texts and oral traditions they worked from and pieced

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29. On this point, see Kinneavy's taxonomy of discursive aims in *A Theory of Discourse*.

together into the "story" the Bible purports to tell. Scholars and historians have worked tirelessly to understand how the Bible that so many believe in, even if they have not read much of it, came into existence. The study offered here assumes the value of this historical and textual scholarship and relies on it in the chapters ahead. However, *this book makes no claim to contribute to this specialized scholarship*. I will not be weighing in on whether the Priestly Author or the J writer or the Redactor wrote this or that passage God speaks.[30] Rather, this book is meant for those interested in the interconnections among rhetoric, language, and religion, since they would very likely be the ones most interested in the degree to which the biblical God of the popular American imagination is, along with Jesus, the dominant rhetor of the Bible.

The limited space of one book on this quite vast subject, as I have said, prohibits analyses of the many *indirect reports* of what God says or does that can be found in the works of the prophets and others. Even this restriction compels a further one, since this study cannot dwell on or analyze *every* utterance God makes in the Bible. Some will be mentioned in passing. Others will be examined more thoroughly. Similar restrictions will apply to the speeches and actions of God's ostensible son, Jesus Christ, whose life and teachings this study will consider as the biblical God's last argument, His peroration as it were. There, the analysis will work from the Four Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, and not Paul's or other authors' efforts to interpret Christ's teachings or its history.

Various scholars and critics of rhetoric have already written about and analyzed many different parts of the Bible and the many different rhetorics adopted by many different Christian denominations—so many in fact it would be impossible to list them all. So, in an exploratory study of this kind, I mention some scholars and critics more than others because their insights are more clearly relevant to this book's focus and approach. Yet very few who have studied the rhetoric of the Bible have been particularly eager to examine God's own appeals, how He invents and elaborates them, arranges the case he makes from them, the styles He adopts, or whether memory and delivery play any part in His rhetoric. These are the classical, and sometimes controversial, parts of rhetoric as they have been passed down from ancient times to the present.

Yet no rhetorical study has made systematic use of these parts to understand God's own eloquent pleadings internal to the Bible itself.

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30. See Friedman's very readable, informative but still highly speculative book, *Who Wrote the Bible?*

One might, of course, argue that exploring the biblical God's rhetoric through the lenses of traditional rhetoric is guilty of the same ignorance and negligence as those rhetorical critics who do not or have not drawn from more modern theories of argumentation.[31] These modern theories of argument have been seen as applicable to any kind of human reasoning and verbal communication and thus "are not bound to a specific culture." Yet some rhetorical critics maintain that it is best to study the Bible's rhetoric, since it embodies "ancient modes of reasoning . . . [,] in the light of Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition," even though it is uncertain that even the authors of the New Testament, much less the Old, would have been familiar with Aristotle's, Cicero's, or Quintilian's rhetorical concepts and terms.[32] Those who call for applying more modern theories of rhetoric to the Bible further contend it "is misleading" to assume *rhetoric, persuasion*, and *argumentation*, all contested terms, are basically interchangeable. This assumption can be refuted through "any form of argumentation analysis . . ." that shows these terms are not so easily conflated.[33] Finally, adopting more modern theories of argumentation to analyze the Bible would allow critics and scholars not only the ability to describe the ancient reasoning in such a text but also a way to assess the soundness of its reasoning and the degree to which biblical authors engage in fallacious arguments.[34]

These arguments certainly impinge upon and raise questions about the efficacy of the traditional canon this book assumes to examine the biblical God's rhetoric. By the same token, however, this book, despite its use of the classical tradition's names for rhetoric's parts, does not necessarily restrict itself to any one model of argumentation, classical or modern. As the chapters to come will show, God's rhetoric is by no means always fallacy-free or even always logical, if judged in the most basic human terms. In addition, the approach I take here allows for a broader recognition of the biblical God's rhetorical appeals, to His ethos, His listeners' emotions and passions, not to mention the styles He adopts for various purposes. In the chapters ahead, *rhetoric* is to be seen as a more encompassing art than the term *argument* or *argumentation* suggests.

However, one of the unaddressed advantages of the classical tradition of rhetoric, which also happened to be adopted by Christian thinkers like Augustine, lies in its reach. As an approach to God's rhetoric, it does not restrict itself only to His reasoning, His appeals to logos. As I have already

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31. Thurén, "Is There Biblical Argumentation?" 77–78.

32. Ibid., 79, 81.

33. Ibid., 82–83.

34. Ibid., 90–91.

said, the biblical God is not reluctant to use "inartificial" or "non-artistic" means to try to secure His persuasive ends. Nor are His means of persuasion, His strategies, limited to symbolic media, to words spoken or written. Much will be said in the pages ahead about God's recourse to theophanies as a way to argue and persuade others.

Is Speaking of God's Rhetoric an Insult to God?

Is the approach taken here, by an admittedly agnostic rhetorical critic, certain to displease those more devout and accepting of the Bible's doctrines and values? That is by no means my intent. Even the evangelical faith of Pastor Dave Mallinak is by no means disturbed to conjoin the biblical God to the art of rhetoric. In a 2006 web-posting, Pastor Mallinak boldly asks his Christian readers to consider whether rhetoric is "Christian or pagan."[35] He is as well quick to condemn most of today's rhetoric—even "the rhetoric of modern Christianity"—as "very pagan," as "nothing more than relativistic drivel." Yet even he concedes rhetoric's inevitability, since "[a]ll men use rhetoric," even Christians.

The Pastor even argues that rhetoric was not invented by pagans like Socrates, Aristotle, or the sophists. It was not even invented by Adam, who spoke "artfully, even poetically" after God created Eve.[36] Rather, as he sees it, "God created the world with rhetoric." What is more, the Pastor adds, even before God created the world through rhetoric, rhetoric existed in God's mind, as does all of human history. Since "God used rhetoric, uses rhetoric, and demands that [Christians] use rhetoric," the Pastor calls upon Christians to "reclaim it" as "theirs by divine right" and use it to spread Christianity and to glorify God.

A very different response to the legitimacy of exploring the biblical God's rhetoric may be found in Eric Gans' 1998 web-posting. A French professor and scholar, Gans argues that linking God to rhetoric "does no discredit to religion."[37] Rather, "the association of God with persuasion through language provides an insight into the anthropological reality of both God and language"—"language" being the basis of Gans' own work in generative anthropology. To Gans, any attempt to reduce God to language—and thus to rhetoric—also subordinates language to God; for Gans wants his readers to ask what it is in human beings that makes them "gullible enough to accept the rhetorical appeal to God" if it is not "something

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35. Mallinak, "Is Rhetoric Christian?" par. 2.

36. Ibid., par. 4.

37. Gans, "Rhetoric of God," par. 2.

inherent in the human use of language" itself. In asking this question, Gans urges his more secular readers to "understand God neither as Being nor even as Language (whether the divine Logos or the fetishized postmodern version) but as rhetoric," since "for believer and unbeliever alike, God is accessible only through the signs by means of which he persuades us of his presence."[38] In the most profound sense imaginable, then, and even from the "Hebraic perspective" of the Christian Old Testament, and its felicitous rival, the Tanakh, God's own "creation is a rhetoric, a literal speech act." God, as George Steiner phrases it, breathes and "speaks the world."[39]

As the next chapter will show, however, God's world-generating rhetoric is a more complicated idea than at first appears. Yet Pastor Mallinak, Professor Gans, and Professor Steiner all believe, obviously for different reasons, that God and rhetoric are not and never have been at odds, as words or ideas. All seem to suggest that to say "God" is to say "rhetoric" at the same time. While that casual conflation seems misleading at best, if writers so different in their own rhetorical stances and readerships, and separated by variable time-spans, can agree that it is no blasphemy to think or speak of "God," "eloquence," and "rhetoric" together, there really seems to be no compelling reason why the exploration of the biblical God's rhetoric should upset anyone open to considering this question and all that it implies.

In one sense, my exploratory efforts represent what Wayne C. Booth called for in 1991, and again in 2004, though not exactly as Booth may have intended—a "rhetorological" study. By this term as used in 1991, Booth had in mind the "comparative rhetorical study" of different human rhetorics that would "inevitably" lead a rhetorologist to "theology" and to the consideration at the very least of the God who made human beings "rhetorical creatures, ever attempting to increase our chances of critical understanding through symbolic exchange."[40] In 2004, Booth defined "rhetorology" (as opposed to "rhetrickery") as the "deepest form of [Listening Rhetoric]; the systematic probing for 'common ground,'" and described the "rhetorologist" as the person who seeks through listening to different, contrasting arguments the "often disappointed" goal of "mutual understanding."[41]

It is highly doubtful that Booth would have envisioned a book such as this one, since he had in mind the comparative study of two opposing, human rhetorics, both being grounded in God's speaking the world into existence. Yet, inasmuch as the biblical God's own rhetoric is sometimes

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38. Ibid., par. 6, 8.
39. Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 33.
40. Booth, "Rhetoric and Religion," 71–72, 77.
41. Booth, *Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, 11.

at odds with human rhetoric, and inasmuch as this book hopes to show in what ways human and divine rhetorics overlap, *Eloquence Divine* seeks as well a "mutual understanding" through systematically comparing the biblical God's rhetoric to the system of rhetorical study as old as Aristotle, if not older. A rheterological study of this sort seems all the more necessary because Americans have lived through more than a decade during which time they have all witnessed the increasing, sometimes violent visibility of religions in our world, in our politics, and in our social institutions. It seems necessary, too, because, as human beings who use and are used by rhetoric, and who are in fact "gullible," even to Booth's "rhetrickery," scholars and critics are all the more obligated to understand the biblical God's own rhetoric, and how His uses resemble and depart from humans'.

The chapters ahead admittedly depend on "pagan" rhetorical categories—invention, arrangement, style, memory and delivery—not because they are necessarily "pagan" and therefore certain to offend the devout (though this outcome is by means assured), but because these categories have been and continue to be useful ways of analyzing human rhetoric. Applying them to a divine being who speaks and acts in the Bible may very well expose both the advantages and limitations of approaching this God as a rhetor.

Some think these pagan categories outline the "process" a rhetor should follow to produce an argument and achieve the desired effect (conviction/persuasion) on listeners. Others believe this rhetorical "process" also explains how writers produce any type of written text.[42] The extent to which these categories in fact do suggest a "process" that pagan rhetors followed when they prepared to argue in courtrooms, public assemblies, or other venues is certainly open for debate. So, too, is its extension into a general model of a writing "process."

Still, scholars of rhetoric have long agreed that invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery are and have been the received parts of rhetoric—a tradition passed down over the centuries, taught, learned, and followed by many speakers and writers, pagan and Christian alike. Even if

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42. For those who favor identifying rhetoric and writing as a "process," see Murphy, "Rhetorical History as a Guide to the Salvation of American Reading and Writing," 3–12; Kinneavy, "Restoring the Humanities," 19–20; Lunsford and Ede, "On Distinctions Between Classical and Modern Rhetoric," 37–49; Young, "Paradigms and Problems," 29–47; and Arrington, "Traditions of the Writing Process," 2–4, 9–10. For more critical responses to this linkage, see Knoblauch and Brannon, *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*; Knoblauch, "Modern Composition Theory and the Rhetorical Tradition," 3–4, 11–16; Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," 328–29; Halloran, "Tradition and Theory in Rhetoric," 234; and Arrington's analysis of these and other works in *Rhetoric's Agons*, 321–41.

the authors of the Bible, known and unknown, never received any training in or exposure to classical rhetoric, this fact would not necessarily mean they could not compose rhetorical speeches for the biblical God to make, or that these speeches could not be understood or examined in much the same way as other rhetorical speeches from human and "pagan" authors.

Again, how far these categories can assist us in understanding God's rhetoric remains to be seen and shown in the chapters ahead. In ancient times, a Greek or Roman rhetor could turn to the issue at hand to gain some sense of how to invent a case to argue. But how does the biblical God do that, as God? What sorts of appeals does He make to His auditors? Who are His auditors? These questions are the difficult starting points for the next several chapters which explore God's inventiveness as a rhetor.