Introduction

Eloquence Divine grew out of some speculative remarks on God's rhetoric I delivered in Louisville, Kentucky, in March 2010, at a national conference for scholars and teachers, most from English departments' various programs in rhetoric, writing studies, and literature—some of the readers I imagine for this book. Those of us on the conference panel that morning were responding to Stanley Fish's closing remark in "One University Under God," published in January, 2005. Fish ends his article on religion's re-emerging importance with a response to a curious reporter who asked what Fish thought would follow "high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy" in the wake of Derrida's death. Fish's answer was immediate, and unambiguous—"religion."[1]

Certainly—and Fish admits as much—the American reading public does not want for books on religion or with "God" in their titles. Their sheer abundance in any still solvent American bookstore belies the provocative title of Jon Meacham's 2009 *Newsweek* article, "The End of Christian America." Meacham makes much of a statistic cited from the American Religious Identification Survey (completed in the same year as Meacham's article) showing that almost twice as many Americans (15%) claim "no religious affiliation" compared to those making this claim roughly a decade earlier (8%).[2]

This increase hardly seems to justify Meacham's sensationalized title, but neither Meacham nor Fish mentions one often overlooked part of the academy that has been steadily growing, and taking religion's resurgence very "seriously" long before Fish's comment.

1. Fish, "One University Under God," par. 31.
2. Meacham, "The End of Christian America," 34.

That overlooked enclave consists of renewed interest in what has been called the "rhetoric of religion"—that "immense undiscovered country" which now invites many different "critical and theoretical approaches" and many types of knowledge, all perhaps suggesting how "universal" rhetoric and religion are "to the human condition."[3] *Eloquence Divine* hopes to contribute in its own small way to this growing area of interest, especially among English and humanities teachers and their students as well as any other teachers, scholars, and students who may share an interest in the Bible, its rhetoric, and the rhetoric of the God of that Bible, perhaps widely imagined as the supreme source of rhetoric and all else.

"Universal" or not, the relationship between rhetoric and religion was clearly recognized well before 2009. Biblical scholar and rhetorical critic David J. A. Clines quotes Martin Luther's assertion that "without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure," so Luther pleads that "young people" must "be diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric" for theology's own sake.[4] Apparently, Clines adds, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of Vatican II agreed with Luther: "poets and rhetoricians," the *Constitution*'s 1966 statement advised, should be "handling biblical texts" because, to determine "the correct understanding" of these texts, "due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer."[5] That "due attention" had not been paid to the Bible for quite some time, Clines laments, because biblical scholars had primarily focused on "historical and philological questions," while those who *did* focus on the Bible's rhetoric simply catalogued literary "devices and mechanics." Yet, "in the English speaking world," Clines observes, it has been English professors, not biblical scholars, teaching within "the heady development of schools of religious studies in secular universities" who have been the ones trying to help students understand and appreciate the Bible as literature, as "story and poem."[6]

A professor of English myself, I have not had the privilege of teaching the Bible as literature. Yet my own interest in the Bible began long before the 2010 Louisville conference, going all the way back to my boyhood in a small, North Carolina town. Growing up in the South during the 1950s and 60s, I could not easily avoid the overwhelming presence and influence

3. Zulick, "Rhetoric and Religion,"125.

4. Luther, *Luther's Correspondence*, quoted in Clines, "Story and Poem," 25.

5. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, quoted in Clines, "Story and Poem," 28.

6. Clines, "Story and Poem," 25-26.

of Christianity. Even so, my parents were not avid church-goers when I was young, and I stopped attending the small, canary-yellow community chapel at the tender age of eight. Neither my mother nor my father objected, or objected strongly enough.

Yet I still recall the thrill I felt the first time I saw Cecil B. De Mille's 1956 big-screen re-make of his 1926 silent movie, *The Ten Commandments*. Like many viewers, I marveled at Moses's opening of the Red Sea, the eerie green fog of the Angel of Death, God's writing the Decalogue with fingers of lightening. I paid to see that movie at least a half a dozen times as a child, and I still sometimes watch re-runs of it on TV. I also had powerful reactions to the 1961 *King of Kings* and other movies about Jesus's life—especially the more controversial ones like *Jesus of Nazareth*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *The Passion of the Christ*. In short, I have been a fan of movies based on the Bible for a long time; and these films have aided in the promulgation of a version of God for many devout and secular imaginations—mine included—the God who speaks and acts with uncompromised authority, the maker of the universe, and of the human beings who argue about how that universe was made, and how we should live in it.

Still, I did not think of myself as a "Christian" in those early years, and do not now. I remain an agnostic on matters of Christian faith. By the same token, unlike some authors I have read recently,[7] I am not a die-hard apologist for scientific rationality or what is often derisively called "secular humanism." Rather, I have spent much of my life, as a student and later as a professor, in English departments. Educated as a rhetorician, I have been intent on the study of how writers and speakers try to convince and persuade others to accept what they have to say and to act or believe as a writer or speaker hopes or desires. Since Aristotle's famous but tangled lectures on the subject from over two millennia ago (and certainly even before that), many have tried to examine and understand what resources speakers and writers adopt to move and sway others. The *study* of rhetoric, then, as a subject of interest to philosophers, educators, literary critics, and theologians, among many others, is quite old, and certainly ongoing.

The specific study and criticism of the Bible's rhetoric is certainly *not new* either. It traces as far back as Saint Augustine's highly original *On Christian Doctrine*, written around 390 CE and not completed until 427 CE, three years before Augustine died.[8] A more "self-conscious," modern rhetorical criticism of the Bible, however, is thought to have begun in 1968

7. See Harris's *The End of Faith*; Hitchens, *God Is not Great*; and Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. For an intriguing counter-argument to the atheistic attack on religion, see Hedges's *When Atheism Becomes Religion*.

8. Koptak, "Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible," par. 2.

and continues to date.[9] In that important year, biblical scholars and critics were being urged to go beyond the historical study of the Bible's sources, its literary "forms," and genres, by adding to this body of knowledge more careful scrutiny and analysis of the Bible's rhetorical traits, its persuasive strategies, styles, and structures. This urging soon led to an immense range of biblical studies, many describing their work as "rhetorical criticism." Yet what constitutes or is meant by "rhetorical criticism," as well as "rhetoric" itself, remains a matter of some debate.[10] This debate has been further complicated by other apparent schisms: some critics see rhetoric as the study of argument and persuasion; some, as the art of discursive composition; others, as the study of style and figurative language. Further complications ensued from scholars' quarrels over whether to let classical rhetoric guide biblical criticism, or whether "rhetorical criticism" should be more inclusive and accepting of a variety of theoretical approaches.

The invitation to greater openness soon led some biblical rhetorical critics to tie themselves into almost the same theoretical and methodological hard knots as literary studies, often the very source from which biblical rhetorical critics had been drawing from the 1970s through the 1990s. One result of this openness to the complexities of literary theories for some has been"[t]ongues and the confusions of tongues" that "heighten the babel"[11] over what should be the site of a text's meaning—authors, readers, history and culture, or the text itself—and over the very meaning of "meaning," of logos as spoken sounds or written marks. These difficulties intensified to the extent that biblical rhetorical criticism began to overlap various theoretical, highly sophisticated approaches to narrative drawn from literary theories.[12]

Yet, despite the often fruitful babel of confusions, and despite the array of rhetorical approaches to the Bible, few have attempted to examine the persuasiveness of speeches directly assigned to the biblical "God"[13] that so

9. Howard, "Rhetorical Criticism in Old Testament Studies," 88.

10. For a useful outline of the various theories and approaches to rhetorical criticism of the Bible as these have been affected by theories and approaches in literary studies, see Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 1–87.

11. Ibid., 55.

12. For overviews of the theoretical and methodological shifts in narrative criticism of the Bible, see Thatcher's "Anatomies of the Fourth Gospel," 1-35; Moore's "Afterward," 253–58; and Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 74–79.

13. Given the focus and approach of this book, here and throughout I deviate from my publisher's rules for its house style and adopt the traditional, gendered pronouns shown in upper-case letters to distinguish clearly references to God from pronouns referring to other biblical figures, including Jesus, which are not in upper-case. This adoption of upper-case, masculine pronouns should in no way be construed as a belief in or an assertion about God's gender, except insofar as "God" is written into the Bible

many believe in and worship. Little has been done to examine this God's efforts to persuade and convince those He *directly* speaks to, Adam, say, or Noah, Abraham, and, predominately, Moses. Further, no critic has yet tried to analyze how this God tries to invent and develop His arguments in the Bible as it has come down to us, or how this God arranges those arguments, or the styles He adopts to make them, and the roles memory and delivery play in His arguments. *Eloquence Divine* is one agnostic's attempt at such a study.

Certainly, what is meant by "Bible," above, is by no means a simple matter. Historical and redaction critics have labored to demonstrate that the Bible's presumed "unity" belies "a heterogeneous collection of writings" from different times and places by largely unknown writers.[14] To presume these different writings fuse as *one* text partly grants to the Bible its *scriptural* authority. This status clearly can affect how a critic sees and approaches the Bible. It may make any critic's "relation" to the Bible's "rhetorical ambiguities" depend upon that critic's theological assumptions. As a "unity," the Bible is more like a single "book" than an "anthology" of disparate fragments, and yet this same "unity" makes it a different kind of book than, say, Melville's *Moby Dick*.[15] The issue of what sort of text the Bible happens to be can have significant impact on how a rhetorical critic should approach God's ability to arrange the various arguments He invents, the specific focus of chapter 5.

Another basic question threading through this book is how different God's rhetoric is from human persuasion. This question begs another *Eloquence Divine* tries to address, the focus of chapter 8: how successful is God's rhetoric within the broad narrative arc of the Bible? While serious studies of the Bible's rhetoric have been written for academic readers, seldom has any critic set out to examine God's rhetoric as *rhetoric*, a rhetoric that may be approached and understood *internally*, from within the different texts in which these speeches and actions appear to persuade other biblical figures, following the basic, traditional parts of rhetoric itself—invention, the central concern for chapters 2 through 4, arrangement (again, chapter 5), style, examined in chapter 6, and the seemingly least applicable rhetorical canons, memory and delivery, explored in chapter 7.

This book, then, does *not* attempt to describe or analyze the historical and cultural contexts, to the extent they can be reconstructed, surrounding those texts which assign direct speeches and actions to God or Jesus, or to

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as metaphorically gendered.

14. Warner, "Introduction," 2–3.

15. Josipovici, *Book of God*, 11–12.

speculate about the largely unknown writers of these texts or who these writers *actually* sought to persuade in writing them. *Eloquence Divine* attempts to examine what God and Jesus say and do for the audiences *they* address and try to persuade *within* the several texts I have selected for analysis.

Certainly, for the devout, the rhetorical success of the biblical God is beyond question and does not require any analysis, rhetorical or otherwise. Millions of Christians around the world believe in the biblical God's words. Many evangelicals seem to accept His language as indisputable, literal, inerrant truth, or believe God actually wrote the Bible which only some still may manage to read. Others believe in this God's truth, even though they do not completely accept the literal sense of every biblical utterance that God or any figure of the Bible makes. Even more, untold numbers of people from all walks of life, in every country, will have converted to some form of Christianity before this sentence ends.

For all that, some would castigate American Christians who have not bothered to read the Bible, much less to consider the role God's rhetoric may play in it. Stephen Prothero laments that, unlike European college students, their American counterparts profess faith in a God but do not really understand what they have so much faith in. In America, Prothero chides, "religious ignorance is bliss."[16] Prothero's own book begins by recognizing a central "paradox" for America's numerous religionists: as a nation, we are "both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant of religion."

Yet the rhetoric of the Christian Bible's God has been incredibly successful in drawing adherents for a very long time, a success certainly worth pondering for several reasons. First, human beings are not *always* the Christians they claim to be, for the very meaning of what it is to be a "Christian" remains as contentious as ever, as contentious perhaps as what "rhetoric" or "rhetorical criticism" means. Evil and suffering have not disappeared from the world; and other religions, with other views of God, still compete with the image of the biblical God widely shared among America's devout, regardless of how familiar they are with the Bible in which He appears or how inerrant they believe the Bible to be. More complications arise from there being different versions of this God and His truth among various Christian denominations, versions somehow gleaned from the Bible, or different versions of the Bible, or from sermons and homilies based on these versions, or from cultural depictions and portrayals of God and Jesus, popular and otherwise. Adding to these complications, meanwhile, are those skeptics and atheists who vie for their share of attention in the public discourse about

16. Prothero, *Religious Literacy,* 1.

religion, and who employ their own rhetoric to denigrate belief in *any* god, Christian or no.

God has been provocatively treated as the central literary protagonist of the Hebrew Bible.[17] Jesus, too, has also been treated as a literary character.[18] And while indebted to these and other studies of the Bible, literary, historical, and rhetorical, this book's scope is both narrower and broader in its attempt to examine the rhetoric *used* by the God who appears so pervasive in American culture—that God who speaks and acts as the primary agent within the wide, narrative contours of the Bible so many Americans accept as sacred. In other words, whatever this God may mean or be to any Christian, and irrespective of His ontological status as "real" or "fictional," *Eloquence Divine* attempts to consider God *as a rhetor*, as the divine agent who persuasively and eloquently intervenes in the world, and in the worlds of other figures in the Bible through His speeches and actions. This perspective of God obviously depends upon a metaphor, not as a figurative device, but as a way to probe the advantages and limits of such an approach, a heuristic to explore how far a "rhetorical" analysis of this God's speeches and actions can go. In offering this rhetorical view of God, I certainly do not intend to challenge the faith of the devout or aid and comfort skeptics and non-believers. I offer this book as one, albeit tentative, way to examine God's eloquence for what that examination may tell us about Him as much as what it may tell us about our own, merely human eloquence.

Eloquence Divine, then, attempts to fill, or help to fill, a notable gap in what other rhetorical critics of the Bible have so far attempted. As a rhetorical critic, I claim *no expertise* in the ancient languages in which the Bible was written or in the social, political, or historical contexts that surround this many-layered text. Because of these admitted deficiencies, I am certain that I have not lived up to the recommendations that some rhetorical critics of the Bible have outlined and endorsed.[19] Instead, I focus on the Bible most Americans have grown up with and what God says and does *in* that Bible. I do, of course, selectively draw upon those biblical specialists and historians as well as other biblical rhetorical critics for their knowledge and insights in analyzing the various dimensions of God's rhetoric. But this book is largely about and based on what God and, later, Jesus are shown to be arguing in the English Bible we now have, not its historical sources, the ancient languages

17. See Miles, *God.*

18. See Bloom, *Jesus and Yahweh.* Like Miles, Bloom treats God as well as Jesus as literary protagonists.

19. For these recommendations, see Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 91–106.

of those sources, or the rhetorical aims of whoever wrote the different texts unified as one Bible.

Those in the humanities, educators and their students, graduates and undergraduates, interested in rhetoric, persuasive language, religion, and the Bible are the ones most likely to be interested in this book's explorations. The chapters ahead attempt what so far as I know has not yet been attempted—a candid examination of the biblical God's rhetoric in as many facets as the canon of rhetoric invites—in the hope that readers, whatever their beliefs or theoretical preferences, can gain greater understanding of how one, fairly popular version of God strives through His eloquence to affect His human audiences in the Bible.

For some Christians, and perhaps for some atheists and agnostics, even to refer to the biblical God *as a person* is already to indulge in the anthropomorphic fictions that the Bible has propagated for centuries to influence the imaginations of the American public. Yet to see the biblical God *as a rhetor* cannot possibly evade or ignore the presumption of God's *personhood*, since that quality remains very much embedded in the popular imagination of believers and non-believers alike and since, to be the Bible's central rhetor, I *presume* this God speaks, commands, argues, pleads, and tries to persuade those He addresses. Whatever else God may or may not be for any of us, He is *written* into the Bible and assigned speeches and actions whose rhetorical qualities I hope to explore.

To accomplish the primary goal of this study demands a selective approach. No biblical rhetorical critic should be expected to deal with *all* of this text's complexities or *all* that God says in it. So I confine my study only to some of the speeches God and, later, Jesus deliver—many of which may be familiar to readers even if they have not read the Bible—and some of God's and Jesus's specific gestures and actions. I focus quite specifically on the "covenant-rhetorics" God argues for, as well as His fairly frequent asides and soliloquies, speeches apparently addressed to Himself alone. However, I must *omit indirect speeches about or commentaries on what God or Jesus says or does by other figures in the Bible*—the speeches or writings of the prophets, say, and Paul's works. Even given this restriction, this study can only be illustrative and suggestive, not exhaustive, in scope.

To shape these explorations, I rely on the traditional division of rhetoric into its five major parts—invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Each of these parts or stages allows readers to see God's rhetoric from a different angle. They also provide an outline of the starting points for the various chapters of the book. With those parts in mind, I have tried to describe, analyze and, in some cases, assess those speeches biblical narrators have directly attributed to God. These traditional parts of rhetoric shape the

analysis in each chapter while certain direct speeches of the biblical God and Jesus provide the textual focus.

By the end of *Eloquence Divine*, I hope that readers will have gained considerably more knowledge about God's use of rhetoric in all of this art's most applicable parts. If the Bible is "the most significant book in the history of our civilization," "[c]oming to understand what it is, and is not, is one of the most important intellectual endeavors that anyone in our society can embark."[20] One reason the Bible has been and remains "significant" is because of its rhetoric, the power of its eloquence. *That* rhetorical power, I contend, begins with the Bible's central rhetor, God Himself—how and why He argues as He does, when, and to whom. A study of this biblical God's rhetoric may affirm His special relationship to those who believe in Him; but, at the same time, it may underline how similar to and different from humans' His rhetoric can be.

20. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*, xi–xii.