

**ONE STORY, TWO REVELATIONS, FOUR VOICES:
READING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE CHRISTOCENTRICALLY
Brad Jersak**

The Ongoing Issue of Biblical Authority

Back in the day, when the early Church first came to faith in Jesus as Messiah but still relied entirely on the Hebrew Scriptures as their only ‘Bible,’ gospel preaching focused on the myriad of texts fulfilled in Christ. They saw Jesus everywhere in what would become the Christian ‘Old Testament.’ Indeed, we read how Jesus himself perceived His life as woven across the whole fabric of Jewish narrative, hymnology, and prophecy (Luke 24:13-35). For decades, the continuity between the Jewish narrative and the Christian revelation was a continuous wonder of discoveries.

But by the end of the first century, believers were also noticing some disturbing discontinuities as well. They noted the disparity between the image of the Father revealed in Christ with the violent images, actions, laws and judgments associated with Yahweh on display throughout the Law, the Writings and the Prophets. It seemed impossible that the God whom Jesus called Father could be responsible for the pattern of hatred and atrocity often described in the text and ascribed to His name.

The issue was so acute that potential solutions triggered schism. Believers attempted three major contrary approaches. The Gnostics preserved the perfection of the Creator God by assigning OT destruction and retribution to lesser gods and demiurges—distortions of God’s will. They included Yahweh among this secondary, violent company. Others, like the Marcionites, could not bear the discontinuity and ultimately abandoned the OT altogether as sub-Christian and unfit for continued use as authoritative Scripture in the Church.

The Church fathers and mothers who represent orthodox Christian belief rigorously rejected these answers ... *but* they did not ignore the question. They only came to peace with the Hebrew text by nodding to its literal origins but interpreting its *meaning* spiritually or allegorically. Origen systematized this hermeneutic, but he really represents the standard approach of the early scholars en masse. Spiritualizing the Bible was deemed necessary in light of the obvious (to them) discrepancy between God as “the man of war” (Exodus 15:3) and Jesus as “the Prince of Peace.” Up until the Imperial reign of the Holy Roman Empire, the great conquests texts of the Bible stood as real contradictions to the Cross of Christ *unless* interpreted figuratively as our spiritual battle with a spiritual enemy, a la Ephesians 6.

With the adoption of Christian faith by Constantine, the Church was, for the first time, in the awkward position of being sanctioned by the state *and* expected to return the favor. How would the kingdom identified with a Cross co-exist with the realpolitik of a military empire? Augustine, for one, sought to lay some ground rules via his parameters for ‘Just War.’ But in spite of Augustine’s agenda for restraint, Christendom soon became

comfortable enough with war so as to re-embrace and employ a literal read of OT violence. The church-state marriage could overlook the discontinuity of sacred militarism with the otherwise clear prohibitions of Jesus, Paul and John against hatred and violence (not to mention Isaiah's prophecies of the peaceable kingdom). Under those conditions, with rare exceptions (e.g., the Anabaptists, the Quakers and the Tolstoyans) the Church could live comfortably with a cross in one hand and a sword in the other. Stained-glass warriors furnish our cathedrals without triggering a flinch. In other words, the tension between the violence of God in the Bible and the minority report repudiating such a vision of God has largely been a non-issue for most of our history. Even questioning the apparent discrepancy appears, even to many fundamentalists, like a direct challenge to the authority of the Bible!

Moreover, Western culture itself feels threatened when a biblical call to arms is undermined. As Brian Zahnd has taught me, one can easily rouse young zealots to give their lives for 'freedom' (i.e., democracy, capitalism, patriotism), but to convince parents to sacrifice their children on the altar of war, one must convince them that 'God is on our side.' Once that is established, all manner of brutality can commence 'in the name of the Lord.' Even invoking the words of Christ's Sermon on the Mount barely slows the momentum of sacred violence. But to those who hear Jesus 'No' to hatred and death, we've only come full-circle to the problem of the early Church: how to hold to biblical authority when Jesus' Himself seems to challenge it.

Modern solutions like 'progressive revelation' or a 'canon within a canon' are efforts at retaining a measure of biblicism alongside faithfulness to Christ. I remained convinced that my 'progressive illumination' alternative can prove helpful.¹ But a new consensus has been emerging around what we are calling a 'Christ-centered hermeneutic.' That is, we must read the whole Bible through the lens of Jesus. Christ is the chief cornerstone—the Canon par excellence—so that all Scripture is received as authoritative only after passing through the life, teachings, and gospel of Jesus. He has and is the first and final Word. I believe this type of statement works and will finally win the day.

But it opens a few interesting questions up for discussion that I would like to address for further exploration.

Question 1: Why has this come up again at this time?

How or why has this tension around biblical authority—this discomfort between competing images of God in the text—arisen in this generation?

In part, we can cite a general willingness to question authority, based in disillusionment around abusive leadership and an increasing capacity for critical thinking. Further, the average Christian is now *less* biblically literate and the average atheist is significantly *more* biblically literate in this generation than in the twentieth century. Therefore, crass

¹ Brad Jersak, "[But I say to you ...](#)," *Clarion Journal of Spirituality and Justice* (June 9, 2006).

indoctrination or an appeal to ‘because the Bible says so’ is far less credible. And among the most faithful, ‘final authority’ is shifting from the Bible in general to Jesus in particular. But something more is afoot.

My belief is that theologians and teachers are *not* the pharmacists of the Church. Maybe we thought that after a careful study of the Bible and sound theology, theologians would prescribe (via the preachers they trained) what people ought to believe. That is not how theology works in practice, nor should it be. Rather, the best theologians are those who analyze and describe what the praying and worshipping community has come to believe through its corporate experience of the reality of the triune God. In other words, worship precedes theology, often by several decades. As we experience the presence of God in prayer and worship, we begin to compose liturgies and songs that express what we have come to see. Eventually, theologians become observant and follow suit. Teachers may begin to confirm the implications of what the congregation has already been singing and praying (which is to say, *believing*) over the past decades. Ironically, the first generation of these teachers are often regarded as heretical, sometimes even by the very congregants who spawned the original revelation. Why? It may be that the congregation is still under the spell of a previous generation of teachers who they regard as their authoritative prescribers of the truth. A strange brew when you really ponder it.

An obvious example was when I began teaching believers to ‘open the eyes of their heart.’ I was using the New Testament to affirm and welcome into practice what the Church had been proclaiming for generations in our hymnology. Sometimes even those who faithfully sang, ‘Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face,’ or ‘Open the eyes of my heart Lord, I want to see you,’ would go on the attack when I showed them the New Covenant passages which confirmed their songs. In spite of what we were saying in worship, the old teaching that accused any form of ‘seeing’ as ‘new age’ was still taken as authoritative. Thankfully, my sense is that we will finally believe what we sing, especially once we stop ‘drinking the Kool-Aid’ of those who prescribe fear as a way to exert control over their flocks.

Beyond that simple example, I see a similar but much greater phenomenon at work across the Church in the West (in the East, this was always a given). The same process is in irrepressible motion around the true nature of God as Love in His very essence. This revelation has enormous corollaries, which have brought us into a new Reformation in Western theology. Here is my theory:

In the 1980’s, I believe God began granting a much deeper and more intimate revelation of His love to worship leaders, poets and artists around the world (historically, the prophets among us). What we called ‘the Father’s love teaching’ or ‘Father’s heart revelation’ spread very quickly through Church and para-church networks via the moving works of sacred minstrels (e.g. Brian Doerksen in the heyday of YWAM and the Vineyard). In this case, authors and teachers of the day picked up on the theme quickly, speaking and ministering eloquently on God’s heart of love (e.g. Brennan Manning). As we sang, prayed and preached on Father’s heart texts like the parable of the prodigal son (or sons ... or Father, depending on your angle), *millions* of people truly experienced

God's deep love for them, just as they were, for the first time. Coupled with profound breakthroughs in the inner healing movement and a purification of the prophetic gift (both based in the voice of Jesus), the Father's heart revelation took root. We the Church *knew* once again, as we had *not known* perhaps since the early Church (?!), that God is Love and that God's love in Christ can change us from the inside out.

As I watched this revelation capture us, the corollary questions became increasingly obvious, even down to the order in which the dominos must fall. I will state these as questions raised if the Father's heart revelation is taken as true.

1. Revelation: God is love. God in His very essence is love, expressed as the Father's heart revealed through Jesus.
2. If God is love and revealed himself through Christ, what happened on the Cross? Was the Father truly punishing the Son and pouring out His wrath at the Cross? Or what does it mean that God was *in Christ*, reconciling the world to Himself by forgiving us? This is the question of the atonement.
3. If God is love and revealed himself through Christ, what's the deal with hell? Is hell really eternal conscious torment in a lake of fire, torturing unbelievers for all eternity? Is there no opportunity for repentance when we face Christ as our Judge? Or could the final judgment somehow be redemptive and restorative, part of the blessed hope where mercy, not torment, endures forever? This is the question of postmortem judgment.
4. If God is love and revealed himself through Christ, what's the deal with Old Testament violence? Why the commands to slaughter whole nations, including their children, especially for the sins of their grandparents? Why the proclamation of compassion coupled with swift and merciless judgments? This is the question of OT genocide.
5. If we challenge retributive justice and divine violence at the Cross, at the final judgment and in the Old Testament, what becomes of biblical inspiration? Is the Bible no longer taken as 'our final authority for faith and practice?' Or is there a practical way in which Jesus Christ becomes our final authority? This is the question of biblical authority.

Remarkably, I have been asked these questions over and over, in that exact order, in private and public conversations over the past twenty years. Whether in the late night whispers of a Nicodemus or in the heat of Q & A sessions, these questions are the natural response of the Body of Christ to the good news that God is Love, as revealed through the Christ and Him crucified. Beyond that, whether one surveys patterns in Christian publishing, articles in the scholarly journals or the annual themes of the American Academy of Religion, these questions emerge, in order, over the past decade plus.

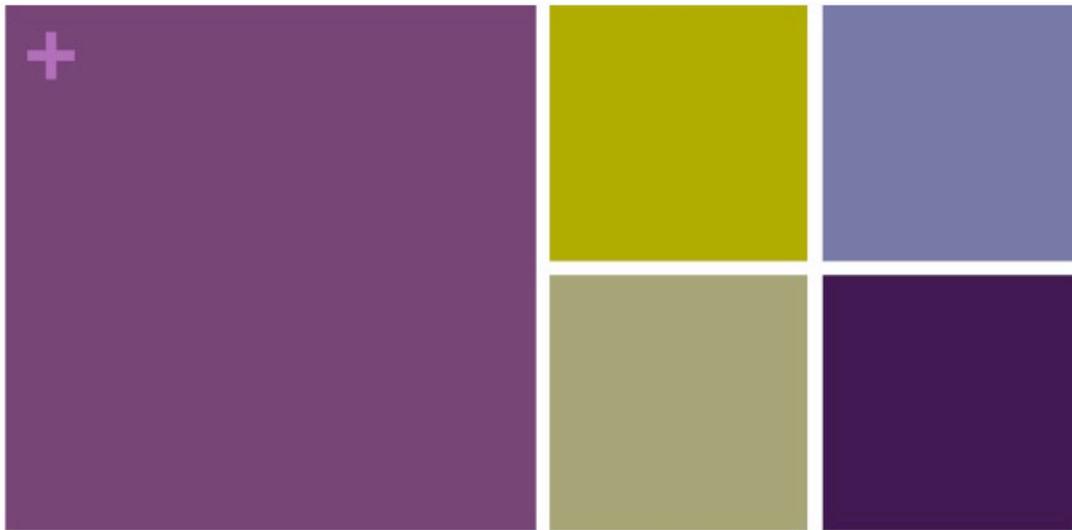
Question 2: What is the next step forward?

The following presentation is a particular Christocentric approach to the Bible that resonated with my congregation while we wrestled through the Messianic Psalms together. Week after week, we struggled to get our hearts and minds around Davidic

hymns that simultaneously testify to the coming Messiah while demanding and even glorifying merciless violence that Jesus-our-Messiah would later directly forbid. How does one engage gruesome images and acts of God from the very Psalms to which NT authors ascribe Jesus as the referent? Even if we use Christ's words and life as a filter, what do we do with the remaining, rather embarrassing passages? Do we conclude they are uninspired? Should they be discarded? Shall we just pick and choose what we like, taking our scissors to the pages once again? Or is there a way to acknowledge and embrace the whole story as a narrative told by the polyphony of voices, without affirming every verse as revelation? Or is it *all* God-breathed revelation? And if so, of what nature?

I acknowledge my dependence (but no blame) for what follows to the inspiration and insights of Walter Brueggemann, Ron Dart, Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, Brian Zahnd, Rene Girard, Lorri Hardin, Michael Hardin, Richard Beck, Kevin Miller and Derek Flood. Others may see their ideas here, which won't surprise me if God is truly sowing revelation for independent and inter-dependent discovery. My work blends original thought with derivative adaptations. My role is mainly to be unabashedly curious, and secondarily to research, distill, and tweak.

A Christocentric Polyphonic Approach to Biblical Authority



ONE STORY
2 Revelations, 4 Voices

Interpreting the Bible through Jesus

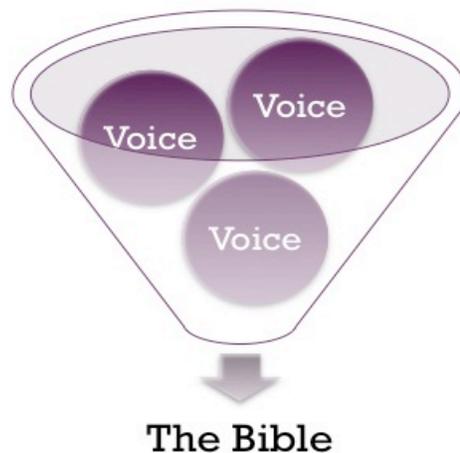
Introduction

I'm composing a novella, outlined in three parts according to the pose of a clenched fist, a loose wrist and an open hand. Each of these pictures represents a character in my story, contrasting the three postures of striving, despair and openness. The three voices are all essential to the truth I want my story to convey, as they interact around the role of our will. The clenched fist portrays the self-will of the striver; the limp wrist shows the broken will of my defeated character; and the open hand represents the willingness of the hero to receive and relate. OR ... I may instead use the outline to track three phases in the life of one person who, for example, is undergoing a journey of recovery.

By including the first two voices, I am obviously not endorsing their stubbornness or hopelessness. Rather, the voices are allowed to speak so that readers who relate to them might begin to see a third way drawing them out of 'stuckness' into freedom. A good story works together to contrast perspectives and a great story holds up a mirror in which readers might see themselves and hear truth calling. After reading such a story, the perceptive reader would distinguish between the voices. He or she would not take each voice as equally helpful or true. Neither would we go back through the novel to highlight only the voice of the open hand and censor out every speech that expresses a clenched fist or loose wrist. Reducing the story to a decontextualized booklet of wise aphorisms by our hero would lessen, not improve, the delivery of the whole truth.

I want to join the expanding chorus of scholars who read the whole Bible as our faith story while also recognizing it as a collected polyphony of interacting voices.

+ The Bible tells our faith story
through a polyphony of voices



These voices come in the form of speeches by characters in the narrative, written records of law-makers, liturgists or prophets, and even the perspective of the narrator.

Evangelicals once cornered themselves into affirming every word of the Bible as true, thus having to gloss over or twist passages that are in serious tension or even straightforward contradiction. But scholars from Walter Brueggemann to Derek Flood assure us that the very nature of Jewish Scripture is to report conflicting perspectives and competing voices without any embarrassment. The redactors who gathered the Hebrew canon consciously incorporate texts that challenge and subvert other texts across the Scriptures ... without blushing, without feeling threatened, without even imagining this might undermine the authority of their Bible. The narrative is allowed to stand, as is, confirming the integrity and genius of the story of God and His people.

So of course every word of the Bible is ‘true,’ but in a richer and less wooden way than the inerrantists could stomach. How is it true?

First, the whole Bible is true as it tells *one* ongoing faith story of the people of God through this polyphony of voices. Second, the whole of Scripture is true because it faithfully contrasts *two* revelations. Namely, throughout the biblical text, we see God:

1. Revealing the fallen state of humanity and its broken images of God, and
2. Revealing the humanity restored in Jesus, who incarnates the true image of God.

+ The Bible tells our faith story It contrasts *two revelations*



The simplest way to say this is that the Bible is a revelation about us and about God.

What the Bible reveals about the fallen human condition is our ‘sin.’ This includes the depth of our ‘death anxiety’ (cf. Ernest Becker, Richard Beck); the nature of ‘mimetic desire’ and the ‘scapegoating mechanism’ (Rene Girard); our human propensity to demand retributive justice and then sacrilize retribution through sacrificial religion. The cycle of violence established and perpetuated by such systems is laid bare in the Bible like nowhere else. In our conservatism, we need not justify the violence-texts. In our liberalism, we need not erase them. Rather, we gaze in wonder at how God brilliantly exposes and diagnoses the mess we are in. For this paper, I am calling this mess ‘sacrificial religion.’

By contrast, the Bible also reveals the surprising and counterintuitive response to our spiritual and social malady: humanity redeemed in Christ, the true image of God. God-in-Christ counters retribution with restoration, justice-as-punishment with justice-as-mercy, wrath with forgiveness, and death anxiety with resurrection life. His Messianic victory is not through military conquest but in radical, kenotic (self-emptying) service. Thus, Christ forever abolishes *sacrificial religion* through the supreme act of *sacrificial love*.

I am using the word ‘sacrificial’ to describe religion and ‘self-giving’ to describe Christ’s love, both for symmetry and for subversion. I am resisting the word, ‘sacrifice,’ even though Christ is our Pascal Lamb who offered Himself for us—partly to avoid any hint of pagan appeasement and partly in response to this stern warning from Lorri Hardin:

I believe it’s essential that we use the word “self-offering” in place of “sacrifice” when referring to Jesus’ love, work etc., lest we also play back into the sick notion of being doormats or putting ourselves in positions to be harmed, just as the early Christian martyrs were warned against. This is carried out very nicely in Hebrews, in that the author has chosen to use *phero* (offering) rather than *thuo* (sacrifice), which is unfortunately not followed through in the translations.²

Now we read God’s revelation of fallen humanity, not because it harmonizes with the revelation of God in Christ, but because the former revelation begs for and points to the latter. It is therefore non-negotiable that we read particular texts in the context of the whole story (i.e., in their canonical context, a la Brevard Childs), so we don’t mistake specific retributive invectives or religious injunctions as ‘the Word of the Lord’ to followers of the Voice of Jesus.

Moreover, we study the voices of sacrificial religion because in them we recognize ourselves and according to Paul, will see their negative example as warnings (1 Cor. 10:1-10)

The voices of sacrificial religion are *at least three-fold*. They include the voice of the accuser, the voice of the victim and the voice of the law.

² Lorri Hardin, personal correspondence.

+ The Bible tells our faith story

Sacrificial religion has *three voices*

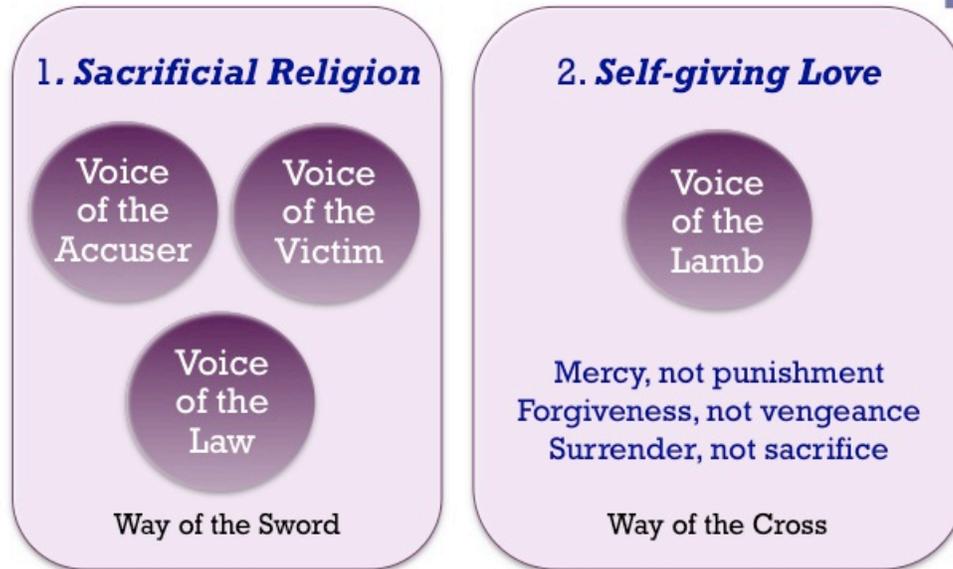


The voice of the accuser is convinced that someone is guilty and must be punished. Judgment (including violence), to the accuser, is both necessary and deserved. It must somehow be paid down, whether through natural consequences or direct wrath. We hear that voice frequently within ourselves when watching the news and rendering our own verdict of deserved judgment on the accused and feeling outrage if those who appear guilty to us are acquitted (e.g. Casey Anthony?). We feel that voice as *schadenfreude* (pain-joy) when we think ‘they deserved that’ (e.g. Jim Bakker?).

The voice of the victim is convinced that they are unjustly experiencing judgment or violence for which they are not guilty. Victims feel like they are on the receiving end of undeserved violence and injustice. If another person or system is inflicting the harm, the voice of the victim wants pay-back, if not through restitution of what was lost, then at least through vengeance against the enemy—some punishment, hopefully violent (e.g. the case of Bernie Madoff?). In effect, the victim becomes the accuser, sharing the felt need for retributive justice.

The voice of the law, seeing the runaway escalation of violence in the vigilante mob or the vengeful blood feud is convinced that retributive justice must regulate violence in the name of civilization, or sacralize it in the name of God. Whether one’s religion is dressed in Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Atheism ... capitalism, communism or anarchism, the voice of the law sanctions violence for the sake of the greater good. Even an ideology of ‘freedom’ (for personal rights or national security) makes violence appear necessary, a sort of blood-sacrifice in the name of our god of choice. So civilized! So spiritual! But...

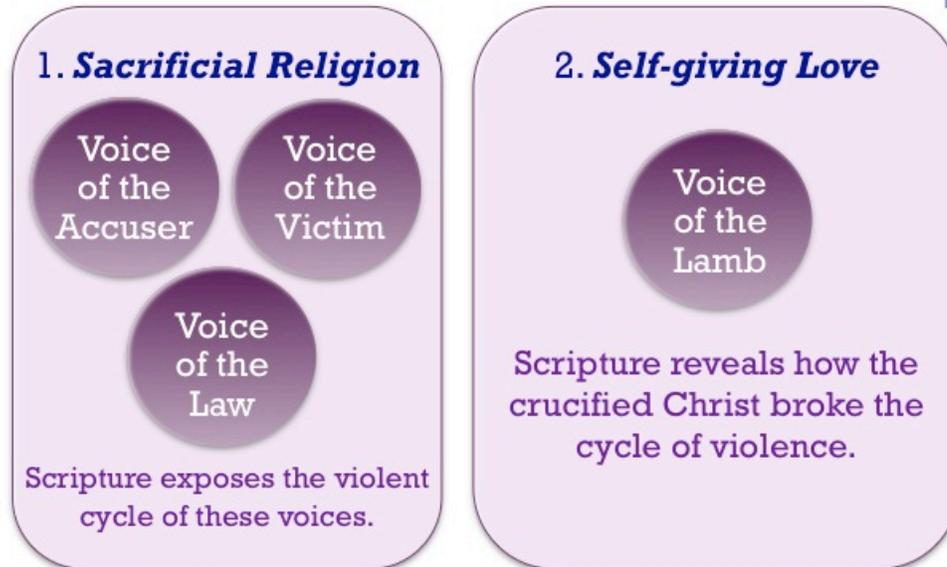
+ The Bible tells our faith story Sacrificial Love has One Voice



... a fourth voice emerges in the biblical text, corresponding to the revelation of sacrificial love. I will call it 'the voice of the Lamb.' The voice of the Lamb—the Voice enfleshed in Christ as sacrificial love—proclaims the Way of the Cross vis-à-vis the worldly-religious Way of the Sword. In Christ, God nullifies punishment, vengeance and sacred violence in favor of mercy, forgiveness and surrender. The Cross publicly exposes the voices of the accuser, the victim or the priest-judges as masks behind which we cover violence as the coping mechanism for our deep-seated powerlessness.

Through the Passion narrative, we see Jesus experience, then accept and redeem human powerlessness. His is the voice of the forgiving victim who breaks the cycle of violence by inviting God's mercy on behalf of His enemies, welcoming restoration and reconciliation into the suffering heart of the human condition.

+ The Bible tells our faith story The voices must be distinguished



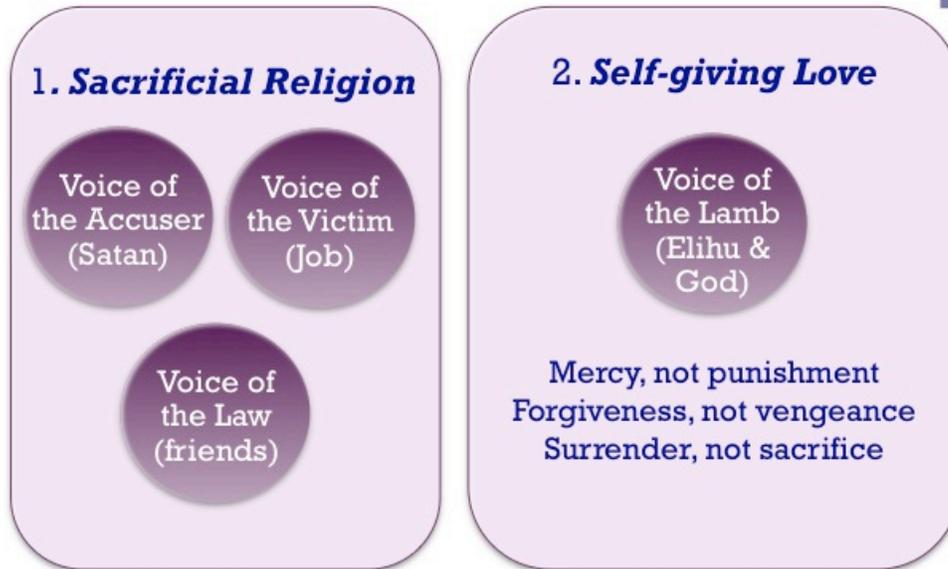
In the end, both the Jewish rabbis and the early Church saw the wisdom of retaining the whole story, the two revelations, and the four voices. The entire narrative would include conflicting perspectives rather than only retaining the divine, Messianic solution.

An analogous microcosm is obvious in the example of the book of Job. In this epic poem, we can easily discern the voices of the accuser (the devil and possibly Job's wife), the victim (Job), the law (Job's three friends) and the Lord (via Elihu and God Himself). Satan would have God curse Job rather than give him undeserved blessing. Job's wife would have Job curse God, in response to undeserved catastrophe. Job's friends would have Job admit to sin to justify catastrophe as deserved. Job justifies himself in the face of undeserved catastrophe. Elihu suggests letting go of justification, praying for an advocate and invoking God's merciful restoration. God, at last, delivers Job when he offers a sacrifice of mercy (not payment) on behalf of his friends.

Here is the point: would the story have been better if we had simply skipped the first thirty-one chapters? After all, God himself tells us that virtually everything to that point was folly! Why not just delete it then? Why fill our minds with flaws? I used to flip right to the 'good stuff' until I started seeing how 'good' the foolish counsel seemed to me. Some of it appears to make good sense. Exactly! The important function of the friends' speeches is to shine a light on our own idiocy. The friends' speeches are an inspired revelation of our own error, *not* a divine thumbs-up to their error.



Example 1: The Bible tells Job's faith story The voices must be distinguished



So it was a risky act of wisdom for the biblical compositors to retain voices that would later be revealed as incomplete, distorted or completely mistaken. It's risky because we might take 'the Word of the Lord' *about* us as if we were hearing God's heart *for* us—as if an inspired record of the violence of sacrificial religion were a revelation of God's will and ways.

But it was wisdom because God gave us the cipher for distinguishing the revelations in contrast and voices in competition. We are not left to picking and choosing authoritative texts according to the whims of personal preference or cultural trendiness. Rather, we have the Living Word come in person to establish the Voice of the Lamb and the Way of the Cross as the plumb line, the filter, the Living Canon to which every voice claiming revelation must bend and bow.

This means that when reading the faith story of Abrahamic faith, we are required to read the entire narrative in light of Christ. We will need to render due diligence to the often difficult work of distinguishing between the image of God portrayed by sacrificial religion and the image of the Father revealed by the sacrificial Lamb. We will need to filter through portrayals of God as retributive punisher, bearing in mind that God has delivered *all* judgment into the hands of Jesus the redeeming Savior.



Example 2: The Bible tells Israel's faith story The voices must be distinguished



1. *Sacrificial Religion*

The Voices of Retributive Justice

"In the name of the Lord, I
will destroy them." (Ps. 118)

"Happy is the one who
dashes your infants heads
against the rocks." (Ps. 137)

2. *Self-giving Love*

The Voice of Restorative Justice

"The Lord is gracious and
compassionate, slow to anger,
abounding in mercy." (Ps. 103)

"His mercy endures
forever." (Ps. 118)

This too sounds risky, but I would argue it is *less* perilous to make these distinctions consciously with mindful criteria than pretending we don't do it unconsciously all the time *or* ignore them altogether.

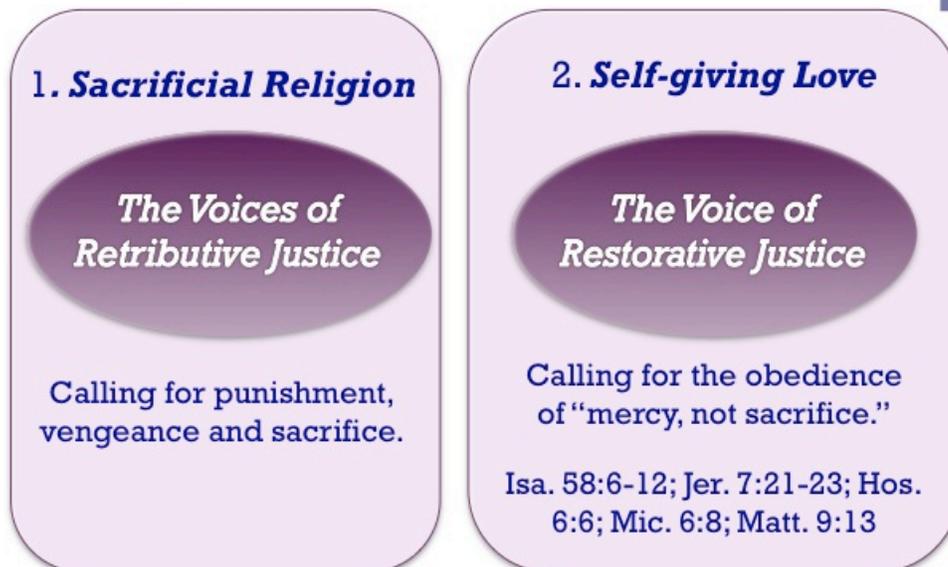
For example, when we read David's blessing on infanticide (Psalm 137:9), no sane person who has experienced the Father's love honestly believes this is a revelation of God's will. We know instinctively that we have here a revelation of David's real but misguided demand for justice.

I'm bewildered, then, when the same spiritual instinct doesn't kick in as we read 'God's command' to Samuel that Saul should eradicate the Amalekites for the sins of their ancestors. What makes us need to defend the command, "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, *children and infants*, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys" (1 Sam. 15:3) as 'the word of the Lord'? Are we to believe the Father of love revealed in the crucified Lamb harbored such violent grudges? Why can't we see Samuel's human urge to spiritualize vengeance in this passage as we naturally do in the Psalmist? Indeed, we *must* in light of the revelation of Christ.

Further, the ethical stakes to discern *which* biblical voice to follow are very high. I recall the 2004 CNN newscast³ where Jesse Jackson and Jerry Falwell sparred over how to respond to terror attacks in Iraq. Jackson called America to remember the Christian injunction to peacemaking (“Let’s stop the killing and choose peace”). Then Falwell virtually quoted Psalm 118:10-12 (the NT’s favorite Messianic Psalm): “Chase them all over the world. ... Blow them all away in the name of the Lord.”

Was Rev. Falwell responding biblically? Absolutely ... if by ‘biblically’ we mean that there exists a voice in the Bible that sanctions retributive violence. Moreover, that voice may be the perspective of God’s heroic man or faithful woman as an authentic utterance of faith in the God who saves. It may be the retrospective analysis of the narrator, extolling the victories of God through His chosen warriors. Those voices are part of the story; they belong. They stand as revelation ... but when it runs counter to the Word of the Lamb, the text is revealing religion’s idea of God, not Jesus’ revelation of the Father.

+ Both the OT and NT distinguish these voices



Nor is the issue as simple as OT versus NT. The voice of sacrificial love and restorative justice permeates the Hebrew Scriptures—it’s the heartbeat of the Law and the pinnacle of the Prophets. The revelation of God as ‘gracious and compassionate’ comes through loud and clear early in our story with Hagar and Ishmael, in the revelation of Moses (Exod. 34), on through the Psalms (Psalm 103) and into prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Micah and Jonah. One of Jesus’ major agendas as teacher and prophet was to

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UY71nzkZHKQ>.

reveal the Father heart of God in the Jewish tradition, and to personally become the authoritative criteria by which we behold that God within the Bible.

For now, I will leave it to nerver teachers (like Michael Hardin⁴) explicate ways in which the voices above make appearances in the NT. My role for now is to raise questions. For example, is the polyphony I've described part of the tension between Paul and Peter, or Paul and James? The text tells us they were sometimes at odds, but are their texts at odds too? And if so, how does the voice of the Lamb bring the final word? Paul's battles with the Judaizers suggest the early church still struggled with issues of sacrificial religion. But does sacrificial religion and retributive justice retain a foothold within the NT? Perhaps not, but shouldn't we ask? And do the four Gospels address or reflect these voices as the evangelists addressed persecuted faith communities in the first century? We see evidence that Paul knew his readers desire for vengeance. Derek Flood has written with clarity on how Paul responds to this temptation.⁵ I wonder where the voice of the wrathful victim also peeks through certain passages? Have we just assumed that it hasn't, or that it's God's revealed will?

I believe we need to retreat again and again to a Christocentric study of the Bible, *including* the post-resurrection reflections that constitute the book of Acts, the epistles and the Apocalypse. We ought to bear in mind that just like Abraham, Moses and David, so too the apostles of Christ and the authors of the NT were people in the *process* of transformation and discovery, not omniscient angels with magical pens. Their works, too, reveal both the human condition and faith culture of their era ... *and* the divine solution—Jesus Christ, to whom all Scripture points.

Afterword concerning the Cross

Derek Flood's forthcoming book, *Healing the Gospel*, seems to apply the distinctions I've been making to atonement theology. He offers fresh insights to our understanding of the Cross. While he a certain careful version of substitutionary atonement, Flood draws a clear distinction between the Cross as divine retribution (the appeasement of an angry deity), which he rejects, and the Cross as a healing work of restorative justice. In his clear-minded reading of Romans and Hebrew, he leads the reader to see how wrath is averted by justification rather than satisfied by violence.

For my part, I would largely echo Flood this way:

⁴ Michael Hardin, *The Jesus-Driven Life and Lamb Up* (forthcoming).

⁵ Derek Flood, "The Way of Grace and Peace," *Sojourners*, <http://sojo.net/magazine/2012/01/way-peace-and-grace>.

+ In our theology of the Cross,
distinguish these voices



Evangelical theology since the Reformation has predominantly interpreted the Cross through the old lens of sacrificial religion (on steroids). We articulated its meaning according to the juridical voices of retributive justice. And as Isaiah 53 foretold, we would consider crucified One ‘stricken by God.’ We thought that God was pouring out His wrath on the Christ to satiate His own need for retribution. We thought that Jesus’ sacrifice was offered to appease the anger of God against the sin of the world.

But as I’ve said elsewhere,⁶ the Cross is not so much the ultimate religious sacrifice as it is the ultimate revelation of sacrificial love. God is not reconciled to us through retribution; we are reconciled to him through forgiveness. In other words, God was *never* our enemy!⁷ The Cross does *not* reveal the violence of God against sin, but once again, reveals both the violence of the human condition and the love of God towards sinners. In fact, the Cross of Christ does not change *anything* about God or His orientation towards the world; it reveals the gracious heart of the Father who has always been, is now, and will always be perfectly revealed in Jesus.

⁶ Cf. Jersak and Hardin (eds.), *Stricken by God?*

⁷ Cf. Brian Zahnd, *Unconditional?* and *Beauty will Save the World*.