

Wrestling with God

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Unfolding the Paper Calf

Klaas Hoekman

The illustrations in this book

Jan Luyken and his son Caspar were highly prolific artists who produced thousands of etchings for the flourishing book market of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Their detailed prints were widely utilized in prestigious Bible editions, such as the renowned Mortier Bible, to visually and emotionally reinforce the sacred texts for the reader. Furthermore, their dramatic images played a pivotal role in historical works on religious persecution, depicting martyrdom with significant precision and expressive power. Their illustrations were also employed in popular emblem books to connect deeper moral and spiritual life lessons with everyday scenes and trades. During that period, these prints functioned not merely as ornamentation, but primarily as powerful educational tools that facilitated personal reflection and the comprehension of complex religious narratives.

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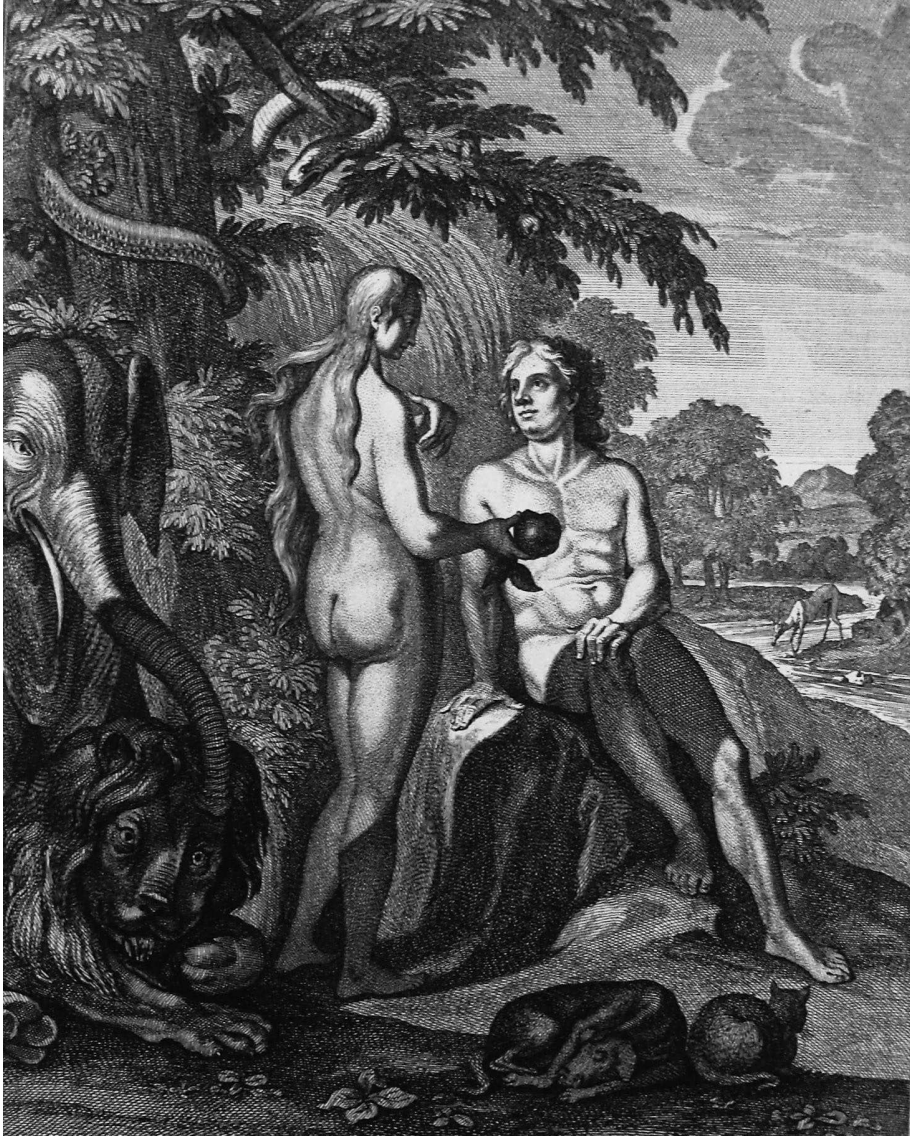
This book would never have come to fruition without the help of a fantastic group of critical brothers and sisters. I have frequently bombarded you with early, rough manuscripts recently, and I could always rely on your candid, unvarnished feedback. My profound gratitude goes out to all the early readers—from my fellow minimalists to the maximalists, and everyone in between—who took the time to critically evaluate my texts, provide me with substantial commentary, and embark on this theological journey of discovery alongside me.

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In the Beginning ...



The Temptation of Adam and Eve

A Minimalist Head with a Moderate Heart

On lenses, sweat, dust, and what came from above

When I first examined the Bible closely, I discovered something that changed everything for me. It was a sobering discovery, but at the same time a liberation: the Bible did not just fall from the sky. It is not a ready-made manual scratched into marble by a divine finger while the rest of the world stood still. For centuries, we have buried this book under a pious veil, but whoever removes it discovers something beautiful: the Bible smells of sweat and dust, of the ash of burned cities and the ink of political contracts.

You should therefore not see this book as an attack on the Bible, but as an attempt to see the text for what it truly is. If we want to take the Bible seriously, we must first take it off its pedestal.

Through which lens do we read?

Once we discover that the Bible originated in the mud of history, we must choose how we continue to read the text. Within theology and biblical studies, we can roughly distinguish three camps, three lenses through which we look at these texts:

The Maximalists: They believe the Bible is historically and scientifically accurate from cover to cover. If science or archaeology does not support a biblical narrative, they assume we simply have not yet found the evidence in the ground. The text is always right.

The Moderates: This camp does not immediately accept every biblical narrative as a historical fact, but always looks for a core of truth. They accept that a story may be exaggerated, but do believe it harks back to something that happened long ago.

The Minimalists: This is the scientific lens. If there is no historical or archaeological data to support a biblical narrative, they assume that, historically speaking, it did not happen. They refuse to engage in mental gymnastics to turn the Bible into a history book. For them, the Bible is theology, theology, and theology again.

My compass: From the bottom up

The perspective from which I study the Bible is that of someone with a minimalist head, but a moderate heart.

My head refuses to participate in apologetics (twisting ourselves into knots to make the text historically accurate): if archaeologists demonstrate that stories did not historically take place, I accept that we are dealing with a theological myth. But my heart still reads the theological value in those texts. The heart sees why those stories were ever written down by people, and what hope for liberation they offer us today.

From that dynamic, I employ in this book the premise summarized by Dutch theologian Harry Kuitert: "*Everything we know from above comes from below.*" That might sound audacious, especially when we have grown up with the idea that the Bible is an untouchable document. Yet this is the way to take the text seriously. We descend into the politics of that time, the fear of world empires, and the smell of the markets in ancient Israel.

For us, not to us

I am also guided by a second principle, a well-known maxim of the Old Testament scholar John H. Walton: the Bible was written for us, but not to us. The writers did not have a twenty-first-century reader in mind. They wrote to their contemporaries: farmers who buckled under taxes, or priests who wept at the ruins of their destroyed temple. A man like Paul would undoubtedly have phrased his letters differently had he realized that we would be looking over his shoulder two thousand years later. But precisely because they did not write for eternity, life drips from the pages. If we read the Bible as if it were an email sent to our inbox yesterday, we do violence to that history. Only when we leave the text in its own time do we discover what it can mean to us.

What we will do in this book

To keep this journey of discovery manageable, we will follow a fixed structure while reading. Together, the chapters form the historical common thread; they take us chronologically through the history and the moments of crisis of the people. In between, we regularly step off this path via Feature boxes. We use these sections to pause and reflect on a single biblical theme.

With this compass in hand, we enter the library of antiquity. To understand the theology from 'below,' we will do four things in the coming pages:

Piece the puzzle together: We discover that the Bible was not written by a single author, but is a patchwork of sources, written by people with varying political agendas.

Explore the mud: We look at the reality of that time. A world in which women were legal property, prostitution was tolerated, and death formed the final boundary, without the writers dreaming of a heaven or hell.

Trace the theological evolution: We follow the Jewish people through their moments of crisis and see how their theology shifted and was influenced by the Persian and Greek empires.

Negotiate with the text: We do away with cherry-picking, where we ignore some rules but use others to beat people over the head. Instead, we learn to negotiate: we reject time-bound violence, but embrace the call for justice.

I will not shy away from technical terms from biblical studies—such as monolatry (the worship of one God without denying the existence of others) or apocalypticism (the revelation of the divine reality behind earthly chaos)—but I promise to always provide them with a clear explanation.

What this book is and isn't

For the record: this book is not a sermon and not an exhaustive biblical commentary. I am not a theologian, nor am I a scholar. We will skip some theological themes and well-known stories. We will not analyze the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the trauma of the flood, or provide a verse-by-verse dissection of the Ten Commandments. We have to draw a line somewhere. The goal is not to cover every book of the Bible, but to offer us a new perspective. Once we see how the texts originated, were edited, and were influenced by history, we can read the skipped stories ourselves with a different eye.

It is a historical-theological journey of discovery for anyone who wants to know how things "really" are. It is a tribute to a people who refused to disappear into the folds of time and instead erected a monument of words that would change the world.

Let us descend to the bottom, to see what came from above.

YHWH: A Name, Not a Title

In the Hebrew texts, the name of God is written with four consonants: YHWH. Because out of reverence this name was never allowed to be spoken aloud, the pronunciation has been lost over the centuries. In the religious tradition, Adonai (my Lord) was therefore spoken, which is reflected in most English translations as 'the LORD' (often in capital letters).

In this book, I choose to use the letters YHWH. Theologian K.H. Miskotte always pointed out: God is not a philosophical concept or a Supreme Being. It is about a Name. YHWH is the given name of God, not a title. It helps us to stay close to the God of the mud: the God who enters into a relationship with His people and who does not allow Himself to be confined to a concept.